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Ecuador Seeks to Regulate Colombian Immigrants

by LADB Staff

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The Ecuadoran government has called on the international community and the Colombian government to help support the increasing number of Colombian refugees entering Ecuador to flee the violence in their homeland.

In a joint meeting, President Lucio Gutierrez of Ecuador and President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia signed a pact to regularize the status of hundreds of thousands of Colombian immigrants to Ecuador, conduct a census of them, and share responsibility for their well-being.

Ecuador desperate for greater resources for Colombian refugees

Currently, an estimated 300,000 refugees live in Ecuador, with that number going up sharply with increased conflict in regions where the Colombian government is fighting guerrilla and paramilitary groups.

Backed by US financial and political support, President Uribe has aggressively expanded the war on guerrilla groups and paramilitaries in Colombia (see NotiSur, 2004-08-13, 2004-04-02), with the resultant conflict driving more and more Colombian citizens from their homes. Approximately two million Colombians have been displaced, with hundreds of thousands fleeing across the Ecuadoran border, many of them illegally.

On a recent visit to the US, Foreign Minister Patricio Zuquilandia said that Ecuador was "desperate" because of the effects of the Colombian war and sought assistance from the international community. "Ecuador is the most desperate country and is the one that most supports a dialogue-based solution in Colombia," he told reporters at the opening of the 59th General Assembly of the UN. "The large mafias took Ecuadoran territory to move arms through it." Zuquilandia said the conflict had forced 300,000 Colombians into his country, resulting in a high cost to the public treasury since the majority of the refugees do not have legal documents and therefore pay no direct taxes.

Furthermore, the country has found it necessary to dispatch 7,000 soldiers and 1,200 police to its northern border to avoid the spread of violence into its countryside, said Zuquilandia. "Ecuador is desperate and needs international help," he reiterated. He said that, after the peace accord signed between Peru and Ecuador in 1998 (see NotiSur, 1998-10-30), Ecuador had decided to reduce the size of its army, but, "night and day...we had the aggressive presence of narcoguerrillas in the north of Ecuador." They set up there to "produce, process, and market drugs," obligating the state to increase its military presence along the border and pay a high cost for the contingent of soldiers in the region, he said. "We are not [drug] producers, we are victims of geographic location. We are right in the middle of the countries that produce, and we have to make a very strong internal effort" against it, said Zuquilandia.

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In September, Quito newspaper El Comercio reported that three bases belonging to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas were found inside Ecuador in the Amazon jungle in the border region.

**Uribe and Gutierrez sign border "co-responsibility" pact**

Following weeks of louder and louder cries from the Ecuadoran government for assistance, Presidents Uribe and Gutierrez met in mid-October to sign a pact of "co-responsibility" regarding the border situation and the consequences of Colombian displacement into Ecuadoran lands. The two signed a joint declaration in the northern Ecuadoran city of Esmeraldas, a declaration that included agreements to improve trade, political, and security relations on the border.

The Oct. 15 meeting, held under strict security measures and amid a large military demonstration at the naval base in Esmeraldas, also brought together top officials from the two countries to review various issues on the bilateral agenda.

Gutierrez said the meeting had allowed an understanding that the intensifying immigration of Colombians to Ecuador should be assumed as a shared responsibility between both governments and that there would be a joint execution of projects that would mainly operate in the border zone with the objective of raising the "well-being and comfort" of the refugees. Both countries will commence with a plan for the voluntary return of Colombians to their home country, with measures to allow the return of displaced persons to safer zones in Colombia.

Gutierrez said there would be a census to determine exactly how many Colombians reside in his country, especially since immigration authorities in each country currently have different figures. There will also be studies into how to regularize the estimated 300,000 immigrants.

Uribe said that he had fulfilled his commitment to double security forces on the Ecuadoran border, with the mobilization of almost 2,000 soldiers. "In this effort, we have received complete collaboration on the part of Ecuadoran authorities who are helping us guard this border." His comments focused more on "terrorism" than the problems of refugees, as he said the military presence would close "the routes of the terrorists" and narcotraffickers. "In the contemporary world, as in this region, one cannot speak of narcotrafficking as an isolated phenomenon, because it is the funding source for terrorism," said Uribe.

The Ecuadoran government has asked Bogota to expand its presence along the border, saying it is armed groups, above all the FARC guerrillas, that maintain control of that part of Colombian territory. The joint declaration also included language related to bilateral trade and economic cooperation. Gutierrez said the accord includes cooperation on energy, and he announced that at the end of the coming year there would be construction of a third interconnecting power line between the two countries. The line will increase the Colombian ability to export electricity by 250 megawatts.
Ecuador's president said he would authorize Colombian dairy producers to join an operation that would allow them to produce powdered milk to be sold in Ecuadoran markets. Uribe asked Gutierrez to eliminate the scheduling restrictions currently in place at the international bridge in Rumichaca, which limits the passage of people and cargo when it closes in the early morning hours.

**Where will the resources come from?**

What remains unclear, however, is how much help Ecuador will be able to get from the Colombian government and the international community. The drain on Ecuadoran coffers caused by the external effects of the Colombian war is another blow against an already strained economy. The economy of the Andean country has benefited from record-high petroleum prices and from the remittances sent by 1.5 million Ecuadorans who live abroad, which allowed a 2.7% growth rate in 2003 and a 5.9% growth rate in the first trimester of 2004.

Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Zuquilandia points to the cost of the payments on Ecuador's foreign debt, which reaches US$16 billion and forces the government to dedicate 40% of its budget to debt payments. "In real terms, Ecuador is one of the most indebted countries in the Americas," said the minister to reporters at the UN. The external debt rose to 95% of GDP in 2002, while in Argentina, which suspended payments on its almost US$100 billion of arrears (see NotiSur, 2004-01-16), debt was 66% of GDP, and in Brazil it was 48%, according to the World Bank.

International organizations have provided US$3.7 million for refugees in Ecuador this year, but Zuquilandia says at least twice that will be necessary to handle them. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has also called for more assistance, saying it is facing an increasing flow of displaced persons into rural and urban areas along the border.

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