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Ecuador to Probe Human Rights Violations Under Ex-President Febres Cordero

by LADB Staff
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The government of Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa has set up a "Truth Commission," which will be charged with investigating accusations of human rights crimes during the administration of former President Leon Febres Cordero (1984-1988), the right-wing leader of the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). The commission will also look into alleged human rights abuses committed during the last 27 years. Febres Cordero and his allies have strongly denied the accusations, calling the commission a political effort to smear and repress opposition to Correa's leftist administration.

Correa defends panel as means to 'halt impunity'

Correa said on May 3 that the four-member commission is intended to "halt impunity." The commission is composed of lawyer Julio Cesar Trujillo, human rights activists Alberto Luna (a Catholic leader) and Elsie Monge (head of the Frente Ecuatoriana de Derechos Humanos, FEDHU), and Pedro Restrepo, the father of two brothers who disappeared at the end of Febres Cordero's government. Restrepo's two sons disappeared in January 1988 and are believed to have been killed by police, who mistook them for Colombian guerrillas. Their bodies were never found.

Interior Minister Gustavo Larrea said the human rights of "hundreds of citizens were systematically violated." Larrea said 327 cases of political assassinations, torture, and disappearances have gone unpunished. The commission will have nine months to present a report, with a possible extension of three months. The text setting up the panel takes its precedent from Article 23 of the Constitution, which "prohibits cruel punishments, torture, and all inhumane, degrading treatment or treatment that entails physical, psychological, or sexual violence or moral coercion."

The constitutional framework also establishes that "actions or punishments by torture, forced disappearance of people, kidnapping or homicide for political reasons or reasons of conscience will be imprescriptible and will not be eligible for pardons or amnesties." The body's founding document also recalled that "there have been denunciations of torture, disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and other serious crimes and attacks on human rights" from the time of the Febres Cordero administration.

The commission will be charged with "investigating, revealing, and impeding impunity with respect to the violent and violating deeds against human rights that occurred between 1984 and 1988 and other [more recent] periods."

The commission will also be able to "apply for the declassification of state archives that have a confidential or national security" status and that are related to the cases of supposed rights violations. The body should also "promote the recognition of victims of said violations and design reparations policies," and "recommend necessary legal and institutional reforms, as well as effective
mechanisms for preventing and punishing human rights violations." The body will be able to call for "security measures for persons who...find themselves in a situation that threatens life or personal integrity" for revealing information that helps clear up facts regarding cases under investigation.

The Ecuadoran panel will follow others in Guatemala, Peru, and Chile that have belatedly tried to determine the fates of thousands who disappeared in Latin America's "dirty wars." Colombia in 2000 created the National Commission for Seeking Disappeared People and authorized it to build a "unified registry" of missing people in its ongoing conflict (see NotiCen, 1999-03-04, and NotiSur, 1994-03-18, 2003-09-12 and 2004-11-19).

Members of Ecuadoran victims' families and human rights groups accuse the 76-year-old Febres Cordero, for decades a dominant figure in Ecuadoran politics, of ordering political killings during his government. He ordered police to crush the small leftist urban guerrilla group Alvaro Vive Carajo, which took up arms during his government. The violence claimed the lives of a dozen or so people, including the rebels' leader, a former university student, who, his family charges, was killed after being arrested.

**Febres Cordero calls panel an 'inquisition tribunal'

In a news conference from the port city of Guayaquil on May 4, Febres Cordero accused Correa of forming "an Inquisition tribunal" and said his political enemies want to try him "for having fought terrorism." The former president called Correa "a totalitarian" who has revealed himself to Ecuadorans. "I've never run, nor will I run," the leader said, denying he planned to flee the country.

According to Guayaquil newspapers, he said he was being "persecuted" and the Truth Commission was "unconstitutional, spurious, unethical, and immoral." Febres Cordero added, "It is an authentic expression of what Correa is: a capricious, totalitarian man whose works are coordinated from Venezuela," an allusion to Correa ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Febres Cordero also attacked Correa's masculinity, saying, "The president does not have to hide behind this commission, he has to find more masculine mechanisms to persecute me for fighting the scourge of terrorism."

Febres Cordero claimed the commission was made up of his "political adversaries" and lacked independence. "The commission only lacks Edgar Frias and Juan Cuvi," ex-guerrillas of the Alvaro Vive group, he said. Febres Cordero resigned from Congress in January and retired from politics because of poor health (see NotiSur, 2007-01-26). Correa's populist campaign platform included promises to wipe out the old party oligarchy that controlled Ecuadoran politics, an oligarchy in which Febres Cordero was one of the most prominent figures.

One of Correa's campaign promises that he reiterated shortly after coming into office was that he would "unravel and unmask the crimes against humanity committed by security organisms of the state and, particularly, in certain governments." In late May, the commission said there would be guarantees for Febres Cordero to defend himself.

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