Ecuador Seeks to Invest in Crisis-Ridden Northern Border With Colombia

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The government of Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa has begun to implement its Plan Ecuador, an effort to make Ecuador's northern border with Colombia more secure and attend to the humanitarian crisis there. Correa conceives of the plan as a nonviolent countermeasure to the US-funded Plan Colombia, a multibillion-dollar aid package consisting mostly of military material and funding (see NotiSur, 2001-03-02 and 2004-04-02).

Correa offers alternative to Plan Colombia

Human rights groups and the UN have praised Correa's plan for the northern border area, where a refugee crisis of Colombians displaced by the ongoing civil conflict in their country is taking place (see NotiSur, 2006-03-03).

In April, Correa announced efforts to use government spending for Plan Ecuador. "We hope that the problems of the common border will be overcome, and we regret that the Colombian government insists on the failed Plan Colombia, which has not resolved the problem of drug trafficking but has indeed altered its relations with Ecuador," he said on April 24. He presented the plan that day, saying that his government would not "intervene in the conflict nor [would it] militarize the relations with Bogota."

The Colombian government said it would study the text of the plan, whose announced objectives were, according to Ecuador's government, improving the security and social development of the border-area populations, with special attention to displaced persons and refugees.

In April, a delegation of Colombian human rights groups, labor unions, and Catholic Church representatives called on Correa and other regional governments to work to achieve peace in Colombia. "We have agreed to ask the countries of Latin America to help us to resolve the conflict politically," said Jorge Rojas, director of the group Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento. He called on the governments of Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay to work as "facilitators or intermediaries between the government [of Colombia] and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)," the nation's principal rebel group.

"Our house is burning, we cannot put the fire out, and for that reason we need the help of other countries. The American continent, passive, cannot appreciate the bleeding-out of Colombian society," said Rojas. He said he understood Correa's unwillingness to interfere in the conflict, but he asked that "he get involved in the peace," without worrying about the relations between himself and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe regarding the shared border. In February, Ecuador's ambassador to Colombia returned to Bogota, reestablishing formal diplomatic contact between the two nations. He had left in December 2006 because of renewed fumigations along the border region.
Colombian diplomats had minimized the importance of the intergovernmental conflict, but the hard-line militarist Uribe and the left-wing reformer Correa are likely to have directly opposite goals and methods. Uribe thrives on US military and economic support while Correa has alienated Wall Street and Washington, DC, and called for the closure of the US military installation in Manta (see NotiSur, 2007-01-26).

The dispute regarding Colombia's herbicidal fumigations of coca plants along the Ecuadoran border no longer has a diplomatic solution, according to Ecuador's Foreign Relations Minister Maria Fernanda Espinosa, as Quito prepares to present its demand for compensation from Colombia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague (see NotiSur, 2007-02-16).

In addition to alleged environmental damages from herbicidal spraying, the shared 640-km border suffers from the presence of irregular armed groups, narcotraffickers, and criminal and military activity, with clandestine groups frequently crossing into Ecuadoran territory to get supplies, rest, or set up narcotics labs. Ecuador frequently makes formal complaints about the entry of military aircraft or personnel across the border. Describing Plan Colombia as "militarist, warlike, and violent," Correa called his plan "a response of peace, justice, and equity."

Plan Ecuador seeks to guarantee employment in the border region to prevent individuals from engaging in illegal activities. The plan seeks to give benefits to more than a million residents scattered through the border provinces. Correa highlighted the "permanent increase" in displaced persons and refugees from the north, fleeing violence in their country, and said the government would try to assist them more effectively.

When he announced the plan, the many government and private initiatives in the zone totaled US $135 million and the government hoped to "at least double" that investment with the support of the international community.

Plan Ecuador also seeks to set up a platform for donors and governments interested in supporting the initiative.

**Legalization program for Colombian refugees**

Correa said there would be an effort to legalize refugees in the area. "What Colombia and the world expected from Ecuador was a virulent reaction: closing the border, asking for a visa from Colombians. On the contrary, what this Plan Ecuador is going to seek is to regularize the Colombians, so that the persons displaced by the conflict have the status of refugees," said Correa in April. Correa counts on the support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which has applauded Ecuador's generosity toward the harmed population of Colombia.

The UNHCR says Ecuador has the highest number of Colombian refugees on the continent, with close to 14,000 registered and another 5,000 awaiting asylum. Furthermore, the estimated number of Colombians needing international protection could be as high as 250,000. Local authorities estimate that some 500,000 Colombians are in Ecuadoran territory, the great majority of them in illegal status. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel, an Argentine citizen, lauded Correa's plans in a letter to the Ecuadoran government.
Perez Esquivel called it "a plan for peace and development," adding that it "seeks to consolidate, under a multidirectional focus, an alternative model that deals with the effects of the internal situation in Colombia." Perez Esquivel said the plan was evidence of "the political will and solidarity that the government supports." But Ecuador has long struggled to absorb the incoming refugee population, hampered by its feeble economy and huge international debt (see NotiSur, 2004-10-29). There are serious questions whether political will and solidarity will be able to overcome the absence of resources.

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