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Ecuador Forgets, Colombia Wins

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With three controversial agreements, the Ecuadoran government decided to forget incidents that strained its diplomatic relations with neighboring Colombia. These include the aggression Ecuador suffered from Colombia's bombing of Angostura and downplaying the damages caused by the fumigations to eradicate coca fields in Colombia territory, but which affected the health and destroyed the crops of Ecuadoran campesinos living near the border.

The fumigations

Plan Colombia, implemented in 1999 (NotiSur, July 14, 2000, and Sept. 6, 2000), included eradicating coca fields that spread uncontrolled near the border with Ecuador, where the Colombian government had no presence and the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) fought each other for control.

Manual eradication had failed, and Colombia opted to carry out aerial fumigations, flying small planes at high altitudes to elude attacks from the armed groups that controlled the region. The spray used in the fumigations contained glyphosate, Cosmo-Flux, and POEA, resulting in a chemical mix that is highly harmful for humans (NotiSur, Aug. 3, 2001).

The altitude of the fumigations and the wind caused this toxic mixture to travel up to 10 km inside Ecuadoran territory, as verified in a technical report by the Comité Interinstitucional contra las Fumigaciones (CIF), led by medical doctor Adolfo Maldonado, an expert in tropical diseases.

An investigation by researchers at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (PUCE) also found genetic damage in women living near the border in Putumayo who had been exposed to the Colombian fumigations.

All this evidence led the Ecuadoran government to file a lawsuit against Colombia at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, for both the ill effects on the health of Ecuadorans living near the border and for damage to their crops and lands (NotiSur, Feb. 16, 2007, and Aug. 17, 2007).

The affected campesinos formed the Federación de Organizaciones Campesinas del Cordón Fronterizo Ecuatoriano de Sucumbíos (FORCCOFES) and, along with environmental and human rights organizations, pressured the various Ecuadoran governments for twelve years to demand that Colombia not fumigate within 10 km of the border to ensure that Ecuadoran soil would not be contaminated. In 2006, during the administration of former President Alfredo Palacio (2005-2007), Colombia tacitly accepted the request and stopped fumigating in the area, although it always denied that the fumigations had harmful effects.

In a surprise move, the Ecuadoran government announced in September that it was dropping its suit against Colombia and had reached a settlement by which the neighboring country agreed to pay Ecuador US$15 million to contribute to economic development in the border area. The Ecuadoran government would manage the money as a compensation fund for affected campesinos. This deal was made public at meetings with FORCCOFES.
The agreement also stipulates that Colombia could eventually fumigate as close as 2 km from the border. The Ecuadoran government has thus undermined the premise of Ecuadoran organizations and accepted Colombia’s position, despite extensive evidence from the organizations on the harmfulness of the chemical mixture used by Colombia and its detection 10 km from the fumigation sites.

FORCCOFES has rejected the Ecuadoran government’s reluctance to defend national sovereignty and the rights of campesinos near the border; moreover, the government’s announcement that it would use the US$15 million to compensate campesinos has caused friction among FORCCOFES members, jeopardizing the strongest organizing structure in the border region.

"They have put us in a difficult situation, since US$15 million is not enough to compensate the more than 4,000 families affected in Putumayo alone. It could pit the campesinos against each other," said Daniel Alarcón president of FORCCOFES. Alarcón also said that they would not drop their insistence that no fumigation be carried out closer than 10 km from the border, despite the agreement by the governments.

**Let’s forget the Angostura bombings**

All the anger and the nationalistic discourse by President Rafael Correa following the Colombian bombing in Angostura, Ecuador, on March 1, 2008, will now also be forgotten; and not only will the territorial bombing be forgotten but also the 21 deaths caused by the bombing, including four Mexican students and an Ecuadoran citizen (NotiSur, March 7, 2008, and Aug. 1, 2008).

Another friendly agreement between Ecuador and Colombia has effectively ended the process that the Ecuadoran government has pursued against Colombia at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). Colombia agreed to pay US$35,000 in compensation to the family of Ecuadoran Franklin Aizalla, killed in the bombing; with that, the conflict has been resolved.

"A friendly agreement cannot take place with justice on the sidelines, without talking with the families of all the victims. We cannot forget," said Adrán Ramírez, president of the Liga Mexicana de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (LIMEDH), which is acting on behalf of parents of the Mexican students killed in Angostura (SourceMex, April 2, 2008). If the relatives are unable to seek justice in national territory, they are considering filing a case against Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, defense minister when the bombing occurred, at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

"Sooner or later, they will have to answer for these crimes," said Ramirez.

On a different note, the campesino and indigenous communities near the site of the bombing have decided to create an ecological park in the area as a contribution to building a culture of peace. "The Peace Park will be a site of remembrance, not only of those who died there but also of the duty that we have to build and conserve peace," said Darwin Rodríguez, the Kichwa indigenous leader in the area.

**Military collaboration agreements**

The out-of-court settlements are complemented by a military-cooperation agreement signed last April 25 in Puerto El Carmen on the Colombia-Ecuador border. Although details of the agreement are secret, confrontations have increased between Ecuadoran military forces and Colombian rebel groups since the signing, leading to the assumption that the border collaboration is aimed at confronting the Colombian guerrillas.
Plan Colombia anticipated involving Ecuador in the Colombian conflict, giving Ecuador military control of the border to prevent Colombian rebel groups from entering Ecuadoran territory while the Colombian military attacked them.

Ecuador never agreed to this plan, not even during the administration of former President Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005), who was very supportive of Colombia's militaristic policies. Now, however, Correa has acquiesced to the Colombian military agenda, as recent confrontations show, especially an incident on Aug. 8, when an Ecuadoran soldier and five alleged FARC guerrillas died.

Ecuador's Defense Minister María Fernanda Espinoza publicly acknowledged that the confrontation occurred after Ecuador received information from Colombia regarding guerrilla movements, demonstrating the effectiveness of the "hammer and anvil" tactic, in which the Ecuadoran forces are the "anvil" and the "hammer" is the Colombian Army's attack against the irregular forces.

The human rights committee of the Federación de Mujeres de Sucumbíos (FMS) has denounced the various confrontations along the border, which threaten the security of the border communities, especially in Putumayo in Ecuador's northern Amazon region. The military considers these communities allies of the FARC, demonstrating a lack of understanding of the border reality or a deliberate attempt to distort the reality to justify the incursions.

These agreements show that the Ecuadoran government has made consolidating trade relations and normalizing diplomatic relations with Colombia a priority, even when this again puts at risk the border communities, which will also see their ability to organize reduced because of the offers of insufficient economic compensation.

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