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Ecuadoran Government Climate Change Discourse: Just Lip Service?

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The Ecuadoran government is preparing to participate in the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) to be held in Paris Nov. 30 to Dec. 11, 2015. It will challenge the industrialized countries on greenhouse-gas emissions and call for "climate justice." However, a domestic analysis casts doubt on the sincerity of the Ecuadoran proposal and suggests that it is a guise based on propaganda and manipulating discourses sensitive to international opinion.

Contrary to what is stated in its proposal, on the local level the government has allowed the violent expulsion of 14 indigenous families from their land to make way for a major open-pit mining project. It has also endangered the lives of communities in voluntary isolation, in order to exploit petroleum reserves in the Parque Nacional Yasuní despite a request for protection from the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) on behalf of those peoples. A report also says that the Yasuní reserves are not as large as previously reported when Ecuador offered to leave the oil in the ground in exchange for international compensation [NotiSur, Sept. 3, 2010, Sept. 27, 2013, May 16, 2014, and July 17, 2015].

Correa’s "climate justice"

Environment Minister Lorena Tapia said the Ecuadoran government assumes the fight against climate change as a state policy and has reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions as a goal. It has designed two lines of action: adaptation and mitigation.

The minister said adaptation measures are local and developed with the populace, looking for their responsiveness to the issue and reducing their vulnerability to environmental impacts. Therefore, good watershed management, food-security systems, and strengthening the population’s capacity to manage risks are considered.

Regarding mitigation, the government’s main proposal focuses on reducing greenhouse gasses and increasing sources of carbon absorption (forests). Thus it is working on changing the energy mix by constructing eight hydroelectric plants and reducing consumption of liquefied petroleum gas through implementation of 1.5 million electric stoves in Ecuadorian homes (NotiSur, Sept. 9, 2011, and June 14, 2013). It supplements this proposal with training for rational energy use, sustainable agriculture and ranching methods, and adequate conservation and management of forests.

The government proposal also focuses on the international arena, as the thesis of climate justice will be raised at the COP21 summit. This thesis asks industrialized countries, which are the major polluters, to take responsibility for the damage they have caused to the planet and commit to taking concrete actions for the adaptation and mitigation of climate-change effects.

This proposal calls for common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR), that is, those who are the major greenhouse-gas emitters assume greater responsibility and pay more of the cost for...
the environmental damage. One of the commitments should be to channel economic benefits to
developing countries and those having forests with greater carbon emissions. Another commitment
should be technology transfer and implementation of systems to prevent greenhouse-gas emissions.

One type of economic transfer that could occur would be through a tax called the Daly-Correa tax,
named after Herman Daly and Rafael Correa who proposed setting up a 3% tax on oil production to
be used to create a fund to invest in sustainable development and fight climate change.

It is hoped that, at the Paris summit, countries will make a binding agreement with concrete
commitments, ways to monitor, and sanctions for countries that don’t comply with the agreements
and limits on greenhouse-gas emissions.

**Inconsistencies at home**

The government proposal has generated uncertainty in local environmental and human rights
organizations because of the government’s actions regarding the extractive industries and its
complacency with transnational firms that violate rights in carrying out their activities.

For these organizations, supporting the Ecuadoran thesis means turning a blind eye to local actions
such as what occurred in Tundaymi, in the southern province of Zamora Chinchipe, where evictions
of indigenous and campesino families have begun in order to open some 7,000 hectares of jungle
for a Chinese-owned firm that plans to mine for copper. The firm, EcuaCorriente, wants to do open-
pit mining in Ecuador, which has no experience in environmental management and control of such
activity.

Other areas of mining concessions ignore the very mining law and the mining mandate from the
2008 Constituent Assembly, which, among other things, prohibits these activities in national parks
and ecological reserves or at water sources. In Intag, Cóndor Mirador (Tundaymi), and Kinsacocha
three of the biggest mining concessions, these regulations are being infringed [NotiSur, Dec. 5,
2014].

For these organizations, assuming critical support also implies risks since their allegations would
provide arguments to the countries and transnational firms that look for ways to do as little as
possible in fulfilling their commitment to reduce greenhouse gases. These firms could use the
allegations by Ecuadoran organizations to argue that the Ecuadoran thesis lacks legitimacy because
governmental actions would be ratifying the necessity to put social and economic development
above possible environmental impacts.

The government’s domestic actions have already been used by environmental organizations linked
to transnational firms that lobby governments that back the Ecuadoran thesis to convince them
not to continue supporting the proposal. To that end they have taken indigenous and campesino
dellegations to the UN headquarters to make them aware of the government’s indecisive actions and
thus question the credibility of Ecuador’s international proposals, such as occurred during the 29th

The Ecuadoran government says that mining activities are necessary because they are essential for
social investment, particularly when state revenues have fallen from the drop in international oil
prices.
**Fraud in the Yasuní?**

If mining activity has compromised the legitimacy of the Correa administration’s environmentalist discourse, what happened in the Yasuní raises new and deeper doubts.

One of the Ecuadoran government’s first proposals to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions was to leave the oil in the ground and thus prevent its combustion. The government said that by not exploiting the Yasuní ITT oil field the country would lose revenues of US$8.29 billion over 23 years.

Correa asked the international community to compensate Ecuador with half that sum in exchange for not exploiting that oil. After various negotiations, during which the Ecuadoran government constantly changed its position and negotiating team, Correa decided to exploit this field, putting an end to a proposal that had been innovative and that had brought world attention to Ecuador and its government. At that time, Correa said, "The international community has failed us."

Nevertheless, denunciations by Fernando Villavicencio, an oil expert who was prosecuted by Correa for allegedly slandering him, claim that the Yasuní ITT reserves are not what had been publicized.

Last Oct. 13, Villavicencio said on ECUAVISA television network, "Information about the reserves was manipulated to justify a declaration of national interest and to bring drills to destroy the planet’s most biologically diverse area: the Yasuní ITT."

Villavicencio said that the Comisión de Biodiversidad of the Asamblea Nacional (AL) approved exploitation of Yasuní ITT based on a report that projected production of 118.4 million barrels in 23 years, which at US$70 a barrel would be worth US$8.29 billion. But a report from the international firm Ryder Scott Company Petroleum Consultants, which was contracted by Petroamazonas to certify proven reserves there, says the reserves are only 33.1 million barrels.

Villavicencio maintains that this report was known the day that the AL approved exploitation of Yasuní ITT and that the country would receive only US$190 million from this oil field over 23 years.

The government has not responded to Villavicencio’s allegation, which is odd since it usually uses national radio and television broadcasts to correct information that it deems false, and it has done so in less important situations.

If the information from Ryder Scott is true, the amount to be received does not justify the risk of extinction that hangs over the peoples in voluntary isolation in the towns of Tagaeri and Taromenane. But, above all, it generates doubts about the honesty of the proposal to leave the oil in the ground because the government would have been asking the international community for an amount that did not correspond to reality.

In any case, all these doubts together delegitimize the proposal that Ecuador will bring to COP21 and provide a reason to think that it all was a publicity stunt to bolster Correa’s image and hide his intentions to look for economic resources either through industry or at the expense of a true international commitment to combat climate change.

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