Slow Progress in Peace Process Following War Between Ecuador, Peru

LADB Staff
Slow Progress in Peace Process Following War Between Ecuador, Peru

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Region
Published: 1995-04-28

Although, for the most part, the Feb. 28 Montevideo Declaration that ended the recent fighting between Peru and Ecuador has held, much remains to be done to forge a lasting resolution to the conflict. Both countries continue to trade accusations, and Peru has called on the international community to "stop Ecuador's bellicose educational policies." Meanwhile, both sides are examining what effect the recent re-election of Peru's President Alberto Fujimori will have on relations between the two countries. Peru and Ecuador have a long history of conflict. The most serious fighting this century was a 1941 war that led to the 1942 Rio de Janeiro Protocol, backed by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the US as guarantor countries. Despite the Rio Protocol, however, disputes have broken out periodically along an unmarked 78-km section of the 675 km border through the Cordillera del Condor.

The latest fighting, which lasted for five weeks, erupted on Jan. 26. On Feb. 17, in Brasilia, the two countries signed the Itamaraty Peace Treaty, but the fighting continued. However, since the Feb. 28 Montevideo Declaration, signed at the urging of the four guarantor countries, an uneasy peace has returned to the border between the two Andean countries (see NotiSur, 02/10/95, 02/24/95, and 03/10/95). As a condition of the Montevideo treaty, the area has been monitored by the Observer Mission of the guarantor countries (Mision de Observadores Multinacional Ecuador-Peru MOMEP) and both sides are proceeding with the demilitarization outlined in the treaty.

Three stages of the planned six-stage demilitarization have been completed, but until all the stages are carried out, most commercial activity between the two countries will not be resumed. Nevertheless, since the treaty was signed, both sides have continued the media war, with each accusing the other of abuses, including charges by Ecuador that Peruvian vice minister of foreign relations Eduardo Ponce Vivanco was guilty of spying, a charge that was later withdrawn. In addition, border incidents in which gunfire was exchanged have resulted in several deaths. However, both governments appear committed to preserving the peace, although they differ in what it will take to achieve that. On March 31, President Sixto Duran Ballen stressed that Ecuador was "anxious to arrive at a definitive solution to the border problems with Peru," and said he would do everything in his power in the 16 months left in his term of office to bring that about.

Nevertheless, Duran Ballen said any definition of the disputed border would have to give Ecuador "sovereign access" to the Amazon River, which it lost in the 1941 war. Although at one moment during the conflict Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori offered Ecuador the Amazon access that Ecuador had been demanding, he quickly withdrew the offer after it raised a political storm at home and now insists that Peru will allow Ecuador to have "unlimited but not sovereign access." On April 1, Fujimori clearly stated that he supports a lasting peace, but he added that it would have to be within the parameters of the Rio Protocol. "Peru is very clear: an international treaty must be respected to the letter of the law and the border between the two countries is outlined in the
Rio Protocol," Fujimori said. In contrast, Ecuador insists that the stipulations of the Rio Protocol regarding the disputed 78-km section are not enforceable because of erroneous geographical concepts when the treaty was written. Foreign Minister Leoro Franco repeated that position on April 3, saying that the existence of the Rio Cenepa, part of the area under dispute, was not known until 1947.

However, Leoro Franco stressed that a definitive solution to the problem was of extreme importance to both countries, because it would "allow economic integration to continue and avoid further costly confrontations." Nevertheless, on April 24, Peru charged Ecuador with continuing an educational program that fosters a lack of confidence and a spirit of revenge rather than the "climate of peace" called for by the international community. The Peruvian Foreign Ministry made the charges in a document sent to UNESCO, which asked that organization to intervene with Ecuador on the matter. Peru's main complaint seems to center on a mandatory course in all Ecuadoran schools titled, "History of Ecuadoran Borders and Territorial Rights," which Peru says fosters anti-Peruvian attitudes among Ecuadoran children and young people.

Meanwhile, observers from the guarantor countries are waiting to see what effect the April 9 landslide re-election of Fujimori will have on the situation. Initially, it seemed to give support to the Peruvian president's hard-line attitude. "Peru is not going to allow Ecuador to violate the border as it was defined in the Rio Protocol," Fujimori said on April 9, just after his victory became evident. He repeated that the Rio Protocol called for "free navigation" of the Amazon, but not sovereign access. "We will give the Ecuadoran people free navigation when the placing of border markers in the area is finished," said Fujimori. After the election, the Ecuadoran cabinet immediately met to analyze the significance of Fujimori's second term. Members of the Cabinet were reserved in their comments, but Leoro Franco said he hoped for a "mature dialogue" with the Peruvian president. On April 11, he added that he saw signs that Fujimori was relaxing slightly the hard line he had maintained before the elections. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 04/01/95; Agence France-Presse, 03/30/95, 03/31/95, 04/03/95, 04/09/95; Reuter, 04/11/95, 04/19/95; Notimex, 04/01/95, 04/24/95)

-- End --