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Ecuador, Peru Sign Agreement to Move Peace Process Forward

by LADB Staff
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On Oct. 29, the foreign ministers of Ecuador and Peru signed an important agreement to move forward the lengthy peace process that has limped along for almost two years. Although both sides expressed satisfaction that the accord had been signed, analysts in both countries warn that major obstacles remain on the path to a lasting peace between the two Andean neighbors. For several decades, Ecuador has maintained that the 1942 border demarcation, which cut Ecuador's territory almost in half, was inapplicable because of later geographic discoveries and because part of the border was never marked. Over the years, fighting has erupted near the disputed border on several occasions.

In February 1995, the two sides met in Brazil to try to end the latest violent confrontation. They signed the Itamaraty Declaration, through mediation by the Rio Protocol guarantor countries Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the US. The 1942 Rio Protocol fixed the border limits after an earlier war between Ecuador and Peru in 1941. In the Itamaraty Declaration, Ecuador and Peru agreed to a cease-fire, although the fighting did not stop until Feb. 28, when regional leaders met in Uruguay for the inauguration of President Julio Maria Sanguinetti. At that time, Peru and Ecuador, along with the guarantor countries, signed the Montevideo Declaration (see NotiSur, 02/10/95 and 03/10/95).

As a result of the Montevideo Declaration, a demilitarized zone was set up in March, 1995, and the border has since been under the watch of the international military observers (Mision de Observadores Militares, MOMEP). MOMEP includes military from Argentina, Brazil, Chile and the US, as well as Ecuador and Peru. Peruvian Foreign Minister Francisco Tudela and his Ecuadoran counterpart Galo Leoro Franco first met in Lima early in 1996 (see NotiSur, 02/02/96), and again in March, both with limited results. That was followed by a meeting last June in Buenos Aires. However, in Buenos Aires, Leoro and Tudela could not agree on the mechanisms for negotiations and diplomats from the guarantor countries had expressed concern that the meeting in Santiago would end with a similar impasse.

In addition to the series of meetings between the foreign ministers, several MOMEP meetings have also taken place to assess the progress of demilitarization and compliance with agreements regarding the conflictive area. Tudela and Leoro Franco then went to Santiago de Chile in late October, along with representatives of the four Rio Protocol guarantor countries, in a crucial search for common ground to move the peace process forward. The two foreign ministers signed the agreement late on Oct. 29.

In the Santiago Accord, Peru and Ecuador agreed to begin "substantive conversations" regarding the lists of "remaining impasses" that the two countries exchanged last March. These conversations are to begin in Brasilia before the end of the year, although an exact date has not yet been set. The
talks will begin with points both countries regard as less important, "to allow initial success in the conversations," according to Tudela, and then proceed to the more problematic points. They will continue until a final agreement is reached regarding the disputed border in the Cordillera del Condor. Both Ecuador and Peru will send five-person negotiating teams, while the four guarantor countries will set up a commission to follow the proceedings and lend support, if needed. Praise for the agreement began moments after it was signed, with optimistic statements from President Abdala Bucaram of Ecuador and Alberto Fujimori of Peru, as well as from the guarantor countries. Fujimori said that the accord "is a good sign," that "can, in reality, lead us to peace," and Bucaram called the agreement "extraordinary for Ecuador and basic for our neighbor to the south."

Furthermore, the agreement to hold direct negotiations on impasses over the disputed border is "an extraordinary instrument for both countries," said Bucaram, who took office in August. "After 55 years we are just achieving this, for the two countries to hold a dialogue." For Peru, both Fujimori and Tudela emphasized that the terms of the Rio Protocol and the Brasias de Aguiar arbitration decision of 1945, in which the stretch of border between Peru and Ecuador was determined, "is implied in the Santiago Accord."

However, the Peruvian president said he was optimistic because the accord "is tied to the Rio de Janeiro Protocol, to the Declaration of Peace of Itamaraty, and the agreement of Buenos Aires." He also said he was pleased because it will enable him to achieve one of his goals "to clear up this problem, which is so burdensome for both Ecuador and Peru" and which has meant costly military expenditures to maintain at the ready the two countries' armed forces. A lasting settlement of the dispute would allow both countries to reduce their military budgets and redirect those resources to development projects to benefit the significant sectors of the population who are living in poverty. Both presidents have said responding to the poor is a priority.

According to Diego Rivadeneira, Ecuador's vice minister of foreign relations, although the agenda for the negotiations in Brasilia will be difficult, the attitudes of Galo Leoro and Tudela promise to bring good results. The US representative in Santiago also had high hopes for the Santiago Accord. "It allows us to move to a new stage not only in the process of resolving the disagreements between Ecuador and Peru, but also in regional stability and integration," said Luigi Einaudi, US undersecretary of state for Latin America. "I think this, combined with the efforts that have been made by the military observer team, now puts us on a path toward a peaceful solution, and it opens up very positive perspectives." The US had warned that if Peru and Ecuador did not make significant progress toward a solution, in December it would withdraw its observers from MOMEPE (see NotiSur, 08/11/95).

Observers in Santiago consider Chile's participation key for bringing about the Santiago Accord. Efforts by Ambassador Fabio Vio, Chile's representative at the meeting in Santiago, was essential in overcoming the obstacles that threatened to derail the meeting, according to political analyst Carmen Castro of Radio Cooperativa in Chile. Castro also credited President Eduardo Frei, who called for red-carpet treatment for the visiting foreign ministers and agreed to be present at the signing of the accord. Frei's actions emphasized Chile's commitment to the process and encouraged the two ministers to come to an agreement.
However, analysts in Ecuador warned of several problems with the Santiago Accord. One of those is the lack of clarity about the role of the guarantor countries in the negotiations. Specifically, they say, the accord does not spell out whether the countries will be arbiters or mediators, or whether they will have binding authority. Critics also pointed out that serious problems will likely arise during the negotiations, since Peru considers that the only thing needed is to put in place markers along the border established by the Rio Protocol, while, for Ecuador, the location of the border needs to be renegotiated.

Meanwhile, Fujimori has formally invited Bucaram to visit Peru in January and the Ecuadoran president has accepted. It will be the first official visit of an Ecuadoran head of state to Peru. "I am convinced that this first bilateral visit by a head of state of the Republic of Ecuador to Peru can signify the beginning of a period of harmony and maturity in relations between the Peruvian and Ecuadoran peoples," said the letter of invitation from Fujimori. The two presidents met in September at the meeting of the Rio Group in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and the visit was first proposed at that time. Bucaram’s scheduled visit is expected to put pressure on both countries to make significant progress toward a definitive resolution of the dispute before then. [Sources: Reuter, 10/29/96, 10/30/96; Inter Press Service, United Press International, 10/30/96; La Republica (Lima), 11/01/96; Hoy (Quito), 09/13/96, 10/29/96, 11/01/96, 11/03/96; Spanish news service EFE, 10/25/96, 11/04/96, 11/06/96; Agence France-Presse, 10/27/96, 11/01/96, 11/04/96, 11/07/96]