

Ecuador: CONAIE and Correa begin dialogue

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/content/view/2146/49/>

By Jennifer Moore
October 7, 2009

After a week of marches and road blockades, Ecuador's national indigenous movement and the government of President Rafael Correa have initiated talks.

On Monday afternoon, a delegation of about 150 representatives from the three regional organizations of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) attended a meeting with the President and his cabinet in Quito.

Following hours of intense discussion, the government agreed to review a presidential decree affecting the autonomy of the indigenous bilingual education system and to work toward consensus with the CONAIE over changes to the new water law. The CONAIE will also propose reforms to the new mining law passed in January and which they have appealed before the Constitutional Court.

Additionally, a joint commission incorporating members of the government and the CONAIE will investigate events during a confrontation between police and indigenous in the Southern Amazon last Wednesday, which left one indigenous man dead and several dozen police and indigenous wounded.

While exchanges during the meeting were reportedly still pointed, the CONAIE says they acknowledged that the government has previously adopted social movement proposals including for a popular National Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution, to recognize part of the external debt as illegitimate, and the non-renewal of the US contract for its military base at Manta. They call talks part of ongoing efforts toward “a national agenda for peace, democracy and the rule of law” within the context of Sumak Kawsay (good living) and plurinationality.

Outstanding issues include a proposal from the Shuar and Achuar indigenous nations to declare the Amazonian province of Morona Santiago “ecological,” or off-limits to extractive industry projects. The proposal echoes a recent provincial ordinance passed in the Amazonian province of Zamora Chinchipe, which declares it “the lungs of Mother Earth and a source of water and life.” Both provinces encompass vast stretches of intact tropical rainforest where some of the largest recent finds of gold and copper have been discovered and whose principal owners are Canadian-financed companies including Corriente Resources and Kinross Gold. The government has indicated that this will be a difficult issue to agree upon.

Indigenous organizations would also like to see a recent presidential decree revoked that puts the Catholic church in charge of state development efforts in the Amazon for the purposes of evangelizing and incorporating Amazonian peoples into the socio-economic life of the country. The decree also applies to the predominantly Afro-Ecuadorian province of Esmeraldas and the Galapagos Islands.

Ongoing dialogue will be facilitated by the Secretariat of Peoples, Social Movements and Citizen Participation in coordination with the Development Council of Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador (Codenpe).

Hopeful in Macas, Despite Recent Violence

As of Tuesday morning, although the CONAIE had officially suspended the national mobilization, road blockades were still being maintained by Shuar people in two points around the southern Amazonian city of Macas while they awaited the arrival of the Quito commission to discuss the outcome of talks with the government. Father Juan de la Cruz Rivadeneira, a native of the city of Macas and a local Salesian missionary for more than thirty years, says despite the violence and insults that the Shuar have suffered he remains hopeful “that they will seek out the best solutions possible.”

He notes ongoing heavy police presence in the city and recounts lost opportunities over the last ten days to open up dialogue with the Shuar, whose organizations he says were “admirable” for being so open despite efforts to delegitimize them. In particular, he remarks about ongoing insults from the President against indigenous people whose mobilization he called “a failure” and whose leaders he accused of being privileged and manipulative. De la Cruz adds that much local press coverage of their protests has also been “biased,” and paints the Shuar as “barbaric” rather than “the noble and sincere people they are, who live from the land, the jungle and the river.”

As a result, until late last week, talks seemed distant especially following a violent confrontation when police tried to dislodge two road blockades near Macas on September 30. The Interprovincial Shuar Federation which represents 500 Shuar communities in the southern Amazon denounced police violence which they say was responsible for the death of Shuar bilingual teacher Bosco Wilsum. However, the government maintains that police responded to orders to act “with utmost prudence” and that they were unarmed and equipped only with anti-riot gear. President Correa has also recently alleged that messages were transmitted by radio to incite people to violence.

But local reporter Edgar Llerena notes “inconsistencies” in this latter version. He says he was standing near police when the operation began and recalls that most police were wearing police-issue pistols in addition to helmets, bullet-proof jackets and devices to fire tear gas against protesters. He confirms that Shuar were also armed with traditional spears and rocks, and that they threw tear gas canisters back at police. In terms of the shotgun bullet that killed Wilsum, he says he heard reports, but did not see, both police and Shuar with shotguns. He adds, however, that Wilsum was facing police at the time and received the shot from in front.

Llerena also wrote about a second attack which took place concurrently against a road blockade in the community of Metzankim, also near Macas. In this second case, according to testimonies, police fired at protesters. As protesters fled, a helicopter flew overhead and police used heavy tear gas and violently entered homes from 100 meters away. A local doctor told the journalist that he treated 48 patients shortly after, many children, for respiratory problems “related with the indiscriminatory use of gases on the 30th.”

Stressing the importance of further investigation, Llerena says more importantly than who shot whom is who gave the orders for the operation. At the time that police tried to dislodge the road blockade, he says indigenous leaders and government representatives were in a two hour recess from talks taking place in the city of Sucúa, also in the province of Morona Santiago. According to Llerena, talks were advancing. However, upon hearing notice of police repression on the Upano River bridge, dialogue was truncated and people left Sucúa to see what was happening. He says the experience left people feeling “very deceived” and concludes that “an opportune intervention by national authorities” could have avoided the confrontation in the first place.

Father Juan de la Cruz confirms that there were attempts at dialogue and comments that during several occasions over the last ten days the government could have entered into talks with the Shuar who have also been allied with the national teachers union during recent protests. Confident in indigenous efforts to move ahead, Father Juan de la Cruz says they will continue lobbying for the President to change his attitude toward better governance, and despite indications that it will be a difficult point on which to arrive at agreement, is hopeful a conclusion will be reached declaring this “a province free of oil production, mining and foreign multinationals.”