

Ecuador's court upholds religious teaching law

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Ecuador's Supreme Court has ruled that a law requiring two hours weekly of religious teaching in the schools is constitutional. Voting 3-2 on the constitutionality of the law, the court overturned an October decision by the Constitutional Guarantees Tribunal that the law violated the country's constitution which prohibits the church from operating public education.

The law requires the government to finance two hours of religious teaching per week in all elementary and secondary schools in the country. It has met fierce opposition from Protestant groups and teachers unions who say implementation will create religious tension in the country, and violates the one-hundred year old constitution which established non-sectarian public education.

The Front for Defense of Lay Education, a coalition of 48 teachers groups, religious bodies, student organizations and unions, said it will call for public civil disobedience. Quito's Anglican (Episcopal) bishop, Walter Crespo said the action would be taken to oppose the court's decision in light of what he called the law's "violation of human rights".

The court's decision, announced on December 20, illustrated the deep divisions in the country and the government over the propriety of the bill. Opponents pointed to the significance of the two negative votes, both of them from court justices who formerly were under secretaries of education in the Ecuadorian government.

Ecuador joins other Latin American countries, including Chile, Venezuela and Nicaragua, in establishing government sanctioned and financed religious education programs in public and private schools.

The law, first proposed by the Roman Catholic church in Ecuador in early 1994, was passed by the congress and signed by President Sixto Duran Ballen in September. The Constitutional Guarantees Tribunal declared the law unconstitutional in October. Tribunal declarations are not legally binding, but are a way to refer legislation to the Supreme Court for a legal decision.

Catholic officials have stated their desire to work with Protestant and other religious groups in the country to implement the law. Protestant groups have said the law is just a ploy by the church to boost its sagging prestige in the face of growing interest in Evangelical churches. Catholic churches deny that charge, and point to declining morals, rising crime and other social problems as justification for the required teaching of religion.

Students will be required to take at least two hours of religious instruction per week, unless their parents opt to take them out of the program. Students will not be required to make a passing grade, just attend the classes.

Any officially registered religious group in Ecuador will be allowed to supply teachers for the public school classrooms.

Church officials has planned to start classes by January 1, but the delay in obtaining a decision by the Supreme Court is expected to set back the beginning of the program.

Ecuador's court upholds religious teaching law, *Compass Direct,*
Dec 21, 1994

#