

Peru-Ecuador war disrupts missionary work

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Shell-Mera, Ecuador--The recent outbreak of fighting between Ecuador and Peru over a disputed border area has affected some mission work in both countries. In addition, church groups are praying for peace while supporting the military action of their countries.

On the edge of the Amazon basin, both Mission Aviation Fellowship and HCJB activities in Shell-Mera were affected. As hostilities broke out on January 26, Ecuadorian military officials grounded all civilian flights in and out of Shell including MAF operations.

(The Shell-Mera facility was constructed by the Shell oil company and later turned over to government ownership. It was from the MAF base at Shell that pilot Nate Saint and 4 other missionaries flew out to meet the Auca Indians in 1956. The five missionaries were killed by the Indians in the jungle).

Government officials have requisitioned one MAF airplane, and conscripted an MAF pilot who is an Ecuadorian citizen. Shell-Mera has been one of the main staging areas of Ecuador's military operations in the border dispute. Missionaries say there has been constant military movement in and out of the area since the conflict began.

Meanwhile HCJB's Hospital Vozandes-Oriente has been put on a war footing, ready to receive casualties. A large red cross is draped across the hospital facility to guard against any possible air attack.

Missionaries in the Shell-Mera area have remained in their homes, although those right next to the airport are prepared to move should an attack occur. The Shell-Mera area is blacked out every night.

In Quito, HCJB's Hospital Vozandes-Quito was asked by government officials to clear out all non-emergency patients, postpone all elective surgery, and prepare to receive battle casualties. Several doctors on the staff of the mission hospital were conscripted into military service.

Some work has been temporarily suspended because of the hostilities. OMS stopped work on the installation of a new radio station in Saraguro in southern Ecuador, diverting a visiting work group to projects in other parts of the country. The U.S. Peace Corp evacuated all of its volunteers from the Saraguro area which is near but not in the conflict area.

Meanwhile, local churches have been responding to war conditions in both countries. Monsignor Miguel Iriza, secretary of the Peruvian Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic) offered public

prayers for peace. The public prayers were developed in cooperation with the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference.

Attending a prayer service for peace in the Peruvian capital were the Ecuadorian consul and the wife of the Ecuadorian ambassador.

Church officials outside of Lima were a little less forceful in their calls for peace. Monsignor Jesus Calderon, the archbishop of Puno, Peru exhorted the Peruvian troops not to give up one millimeter of territory to Ecuadorian forces. The archbishop of Pucallpa, Monsignor Juan Luis Martti called on Peruvians to defend their national territory.

On the border between the two countries, in the Peruvian town of Aguas Verdes which joins the Ecuadorian town of Huaguillas, local churches constructed an altar on the border line. Hundreds of members of local churches attended a mass for peace which ended by many Peruvians and Ecuadorians embracing each other.

Worshippers chanted "We are not dedicated to killing one another, we want a developed civilization, without hunger, living with dignity."

In the same manner, Ecuadorian church officials called for support for troops engaged in battle in the dense jungle. Rallying behind calls to patriotism and national pride from Ecuador's president Sixto Duran-Ballen, church leaders encouraged members to support military forces and cooperate with government measures.

The Ecuadorian Evangelical Confraternity called on member churches to assist those families who have been forced from their homes by the conflict. Two evangelical (protestant) churches in Quito are serving as collection points to receive food, clothing and danger. Several hundred families have been evacuated from towns and settlements near the conflict areas.

The Confraternity also organized a city wide prayer service in a public park on February 6, as well as calling for days of prayer and fasting. The prayer service ended with a march to the presidential palace calling for peace. The march was attended by hundreds of indigenous groups sponsored by the Union of Indigenous Evangelical Churches.

Women's and student groups have also conducted peace marches in Quito.

Officials say the war has strongly affected Indigenous groups in both countries. Shuar Indians from Ecuador are participating in battles which are taking place near their territory. Indians are assisting troops in moving through the dense jungle area. Meanwhile, Ecuador has accused Peru of using indigenous troops as minesweepers, sending them ahead of regular troops to detect the presence of mines.

The conflict has stopped debate in Ecuador on a new law which would require the teaching of religion in public and private

schools. A march scheduled for January 27 by students and teachers went ahead with about 5,000 demonstrators participating. It was dispersed by riot police using tear gas. Local media commentators and government officials called any who participated in anti-government action "unpatriotic" in the light of the military situation facing the country.

Fighting broke out on January 26 over a disputed section of the border between Ecuador and Peru. The two countries fought a 10 day battle in 1941 over the area. In that war, Ecuador lost almost half of its territory. The two countries signed an accord ceding the land to Peru in 1942, but Ecuador's congress declared the law unacceptable in 1960. The two countries fought a two day war in 1981, and almost came to blows in 1991. The disputed territory is said to be rich in minerals, including gold, uranium and possibly oil.

In the current conflict, each country claims large losses on the other side, and few personal casualties. International news organizations say there have been hundreds of deaths in the fighting.

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