

Ecuador says it is investigating charges that it holds Peruvian pastors

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--The Ecuadorian government says it is continuing its investigation into five Peruvians detained on charges of spying during a recent military conflict between the two countries.

The government displayed the five men in front of reporters on May 12, and said they would be tried and sentenced within a week.

Ecuador had originally detained seven people on espionage charges, but later released two of them saying they were innocent.

Peruvian human rights groups charged that four of those detained were evangelical pastors/missionaries working in Ecuador. However, Ecuadorian authorities said three of the men were Roman Catholic missionaries working in Ecuador.

If found guilty on the charges the alleged spies could face prison sentences of between fifteen and eighteen years.

The four clergy and one other civilian charged are being held in a military prison in the southern Ecuadorian town of Cuenca.

The names of the four clergy are: Edgar Jonny Seminario Coveñas, Jos, Manuel Timan Sandoval, Jorge Antonio Maza Salinas and Jos, Rojano Gonz lez Alarcón.

Local church officials in Quito, who asked not to be identified, told NNI that Gonz lez was a missionary with The Mission Society of the Christian Church in Ecuador and has admitted passing information to Peruvian authorities.

Meanwhile, Peru has sentenced two Ecuadorian soldiers to eighteen years in prison for alleged spying activities during the conflict.

Both countries say they have asked the International Red Cross to mediate an exchange of remaining prisoners including the alleged spies. Peru said it was giving serious consideration to an Ecuadorian proposal for the swap.

Peruvian foreign minister Efraín Goldenberg charged that Ecuador was still holding 23 prisoners.

Meanwhile, church officials from both countries said they are maintaining regular contact to assure that their countries develop a peaceful relationship.

Monsignor Antonio Arregui, secretary of the Ecuador Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic) told the Quito newspaper "El Comercio" that he was deeply concerned about the two Ecuadorian soldiers sentenced as spies and hoped for either an exchange of prisoners or a unilateral release by either side. He said that such a release would put moral pressure on the other side to release their captives and that either side "would lose nothing."

Peruvian Cardinal Augusto Vargas, the archbishop of Lima, signed a joint statement with Archbishop Jos, Mario Ruiz, president of the Ecuador Episcopal Conference, calling for the strengthening of the peace accords based on justice for both sides.

Vargas said he was continuing discussions with his Ecuadorian counterpart to seek the release of what he called "innocent people who had nothing to do with the armed conflict.

The two countries fought border clashes during late January and February along their disputed border. Fighting left dozens dead and hundreds wounded.

International observers are monitoring a withdrawal of troops and demilitarization of the area which has been in dispute since a war in 1941 in which Ecuador lost almost half its

territory. New clashes were reported on May 9, leading to fears that the war could start anew.

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