

Ecuador: Second Indigenous Uprising Secures Concessions on Agrarian Reform

by Robert Andolina

This June, international observers were once again stunned by the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement's capacity to mobilize masses of supporters to defend the interests of this country's Indigenous population. In a mobilization reminiscent of the landmark uprising in 1990, Indigenous organizations nationwide blocked the country's roads and highways, in order to prevent implementation of a new "Law for Agricultural Development" enacted by the government as part of its structural adjustment program. For a two-week period, commerce throughout Ecuador ground practically to a halt. As with the uprising four years ago, Indigenous organizations paralyzed much of the country, endured military repression, forcing the government into negotiations, and finally emerging with significant governmental concessions in hand.

Over 3,500 Indigenous communities as well as campesino and popular organizations mobilized under the leadership of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) the National Ecuadorian Federation of Campesino and Indigenous Organizations (FENOC-I), and the Evangelical Federation of Indigenous Ecuadorians (EFIE). Over the course of two weeks, at least five Indigenous activists were killed and many more were hospitalized, mostly from gun shot wounds. An unknown number were jailed.

Parties from throughout the political spectrum have debated reform of the country's outdated agrarian laws for years. On May 18, the conservative Social Christian Party (PSC) forced a radically new agrarian

bill through congress. Over the objections of CONAIE and other popular organizations, President Sixto Durán Ballen signed the bill into law on June 13.

Indigenous organizations rejected numerous aspects of this law that either ignored or threatened interests of Indigenous agricultural communities, as well as those of 90% of the rural population. The law would have encouraged the disappearance of Indigenous communal lands in order to promote formation of agricultural "enterprises." Rodrigo Carrillo, member of the press commission for the Indigenous Movement of Chimborazo (MICH) explained, "You cannot simply convert Indigenous communal production into agricultural businesses. This law imposes a vision of agriculture that doesn't fit within Indigenous thought and practice."

Indigenous organizations were outraged not only by the law's content but by the undemocratic and unconstitutional methods used by the Social Christian Party to railroad it through congress. The National Agrarian Commission (CAN), formed by CONAIE and other Indigenous peasant organizations, had drafted (over a period of two years) a detailed proposal for reform of the nation's agrarian laws and had submitted it to the legislature for consideration. The President and the legislature completely ignored this project.

In addition, the PSC failed to submit the proposed law to each member of congress for consideration at least 15 days prior to passage, as required by law. CONAIE criticized the politicians for disobeying the fundamental laws of the land, for excluding the interests and participation of Indigenous people in the development of the law, and for their refusal to develop a law of national consensus instead of one that serves the

interests of a small, wealthy sector of the population.

For all of these reasons, CONAIE convened an emergency assembly on June 7 and 8 to prepare for a national "Movilización por la Vida" (Mobilization for Life) to protest the law if it were to go into effect. CONAIE released a resolution calling for repeal of the Agrarian Development law. The resolution addressed other issues, to stop unrestrained oil exploration and persecution of Indigenous leaders among other demands. Fundamentally, however, the mobilization was called to protest the PSC's Agrarian Law.

Ecuador Paralyzed

On June 13, President Durán signed the Agrarian bill into law. Indigenous protestors converged on strategic points, building roadblocks that paralyzed much of the country. Demonstrations in urban areas and occupations of public buildings also took place. Ten provinces in all were heavily affected. Despite the government and mass media's distortion of events, protestors remained firm in the streets and the blockades were very effective. Alberto Saeteros, Secretary of the Provincial Union of Cooperatives and Indigenous Communities of Cañar (UPCCC) stated, "Here in Cañar we met with the people in the communities to explain to them the negative effects of the law, and we then went out to paralyze traffic to the north, south, and west." Ignacio Grefa, President of the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Napo (FOIN) reported, "We maintained the roadblock for a week—nothing got through."

Non-Indigenous campesinos, workers and some urban citizens expressed considerable solidarity for the mobilization and

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Indigenous Community Center Destroyed

During the "Mobilization for Life," a major community center belonging to the Union of Cooperatives and Indigenous Communities of Cañar Province (UPCCC) was attacked and burned to the ground. The UPCCC is Cañar's regional Indigenous organization and is affiliated with CONAIE. The following are excerpts from an interview with UPCCC Secretary General Alberto Saeteros.

Photo: Robert Andolina



Why did the attack take place? Who was involved?

-As you know, we participated fully in the mobilization called by CONAIE in opposition to the recently passed Agrarian Development Law. This law was not only illegal, but also threatened the interests of Indigenous people.

We cut the area off by blocking the main highways. Because we were winning in the struggle, the followers of Jaime Nebot and the PSC (Social Christian Party) decided in desperation to attack us. It wasn't just because of the mobilization, but also because of our alternative market which cut the "middleman" out of the sale of our products. We were, therefore, competing with the speculators living in the area, many of whom are Nebot supporters. Additionally, we were attacked because of long-standing racism against Indigenous people.

What happened during the attack itself?

-The attack was carefully orchestrated by a relatively small group of people; the general population was not against us, nor were we against them. This small group told all sorts of lies in order to make us look bad and to justify what they did. We never attacked the mar-

kets, nor poisoned the water like they claimed.

The attack itself was very violent. They came with pistols, homemade cannons, and tear gas. One of our activists, Manuel Mesías Yupa Yupa died from a bullet wound to the head. We also had 38 injuries and a number of disappearances. Many people are still unaccounted for. The community center was sacked and burned.

What did the police and military do during the attack?

-They did almost nothing to prevent or inhibit the attack. Moreover, the military shut down our radio station which made it difficult for us to communicate with the people, to tell them what was happening. Indigenous leaders have been pursued and in some cases jailed. Right now we are conducting investigations into the action of the police and military during the attack and during the mobilization as a whole.

What was damaged during the attack?

-Everything. Nothing was left untouched. The damage total has exceeded 10 billion sucres (\$5 million).

UPCCC has argued that the government is in part responsible for the

damages, and you have demanded that the government offer compensation. Have you received any financial help from the state?

-No. We haven't received a cent.

And from other sources?

-A little. Some popular sectors have offered assistance both in terms of money and labor to help us rebuild. We have a couple of new machines in the carpentry center, and we should have a new FAX machine soon. But as you can see, this is a very small part of the rebuilding that needs to be done. For this reason, we are calling on our allies and sympathizers here in Ecuador and in the international community to show their solidarity by sending us financial support so that we can rebuild our office and community center. Many people here will benefit if we can rebuild.

Do you have any final comments?

This attack was motivated by a desire on our enemies part to break the will of the Indigenous leadership and the movement here in Cañar. Although our office is destroyed, our determination is not. We will continue with our struggle. In fact, we are more determined and unified than ever.

offered their support. Left and center-left political parties demanded the Agrarian law be revoked. Hector Villamil, President of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP) noted, "Some *campesinos* and workers mobilized with us. We see this as a positive and significant change. In the 1992 OPIP March on Quito many *campesino-colonists* reacted against us." According to Rodrigo Carrillo of MICH, "In general, the people of Riobamba (capital of Chimborazo province) understood the important role of Indigenous producers in the supply of staple foods and offered us help during the mobilization."

Military Counter-Mobilization

A week after the mobilization began, President Durán offered to negotiate. CONAIE, however, found the president's mediation commission unacceptable, stating that its representation was heavily weighted in favor of the government and the landowners.

The following day, President Durán declared a military "State of Mobilization," and decreed that blockaders would receive one to three year jail terms. Arrest warrants were issued for Indigenous leaders, including the CONAIE leadership. Highways and Indigenous communities were occupied by the security forces. Although protesters abandoned highways peacefully when the military arrived, several were killed and dozens or possibly hundreds were injured.

Police savagely beat protesters, including children, in the provinces of Cotopaxi and Chimborazo. In what was perhaps the Mobilization's worst moment, a mob of Social Christian Party supporters attacked and destroyed the office and community center of the UPCCC in Cañar. The community center served to support alternative form of education, commerce and medicine more suited to the needs of Cañar's Indigenous and poor peoples. One Indigenous activist was killed and thirty-eight injured in the attack, which also reduced a market, carpentry center, library, computer center, radio station, fax and photocopy machines, and several vehicles to ashes (see accompanying interview).

Security forces also threatened or shut down Indigenous and popular radio stations in Tungurahua, Cotopaxi, Chimborazo, and Cañar, making it difficult for activists to transmit news to the population at large regarding human rights violations and violence perpetrated by the military and para-military forces.

Fortunately, the military was more restrained in some regions. Hector Villamil, president of OPIP, reported, "We in Pastaza are lucky not to have experienced repression this time. Before, we considered the military and police to be enemies, so we see this as a good sign. However, we denounce the repression that took place in other provinces, and for that we remain suspicious of the armed forces."

Commission For Dialogue Formed

CONAIE leaders in hiding called for an end to the militarization and organized a mediation commission composed of national and international religious and human rights representatives. Under considerable national and international pressure, the president agreed to lift the state of mobilization and agreed to a compromise on the committees formation. Congress also pledged to revise the agricultural law. Negotiations began on June 30 and continued into mid-July.

The Struggle's Results: Words or Substance?

The negotiations, like all those where actors with vastly different interests take part, were tortuously difficult. Perhaps in an effort to save face, President Durán, on the one hand hailed the dialogue as a success, while also stating that only words but not substance had changed. However, it is the nature of law-making that words are substance. The reformed law—which went into effect on Aug. 3—did include real improvements for Indigenous peoples, *campesinos* and Ecuadorian society in general. It will permit the maintenance of communitarian, cooperative, and small-holder forms of agrarian organization. The new state agrarian development agency will

include two representatives of Indigenous/peasant organizations on its executive council. Ownership of water will remain public, and more emphasis will be given to production of food for internal consumption to meet the needs of Ecuadorian society. It also recognizes Indigenous agricultural knowledge, and respects the cultural and social values of the various peoples who are involved in agricultural activities.

Importantly, the reformed law also calls for continuation and improvement of the agrarian reform, including land distribution, as well as increased access to credit, technical assistance, and better infrastructure. It demands the protection of national parks and reserves, and recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to live from and manage forests. Finally, the law calls for the formation of markets that permit indigenous and peasant producers to cut out speculative middlemen.

Indigenous peoples gains in this mobilization go beyond these legal reforms. Again, the movement demonstrated its strength. This time, Indigenous people sat face to face at the bargaining table with those who used to be their "patrons" (landlords). As described by Rodrigo Carrillo of MICH, "The government now knows that it has to include the interests and participation of Indigenous people in the future. We are now recognized as thinking human beings with rights, not as lazy animals." Ignacio Grefa commented on the process, "We have won new political space and have fortified the space we earned in the 1990 uprising. In that sense this is just a continuation of that mobilization and of our struggle for the past 500 years. This struggle will continue in the future." 🐾

For additional information:

UPCCC, Correo Central Cañar, Cañar, Ecuador Fax: (593 7) 235 266

To contribute to the rebuilding of the UPCCC community center, please send Cashier's Checks made out to UPCCC, to:

CONAIE Av. de Los Granados 2553 y 6 de Diciembre Casilla 1717-1235El Batán, Quito Ecuador. Specify on the check that it is for UPCCC.