

State of Emergency Declared in Ecuador: Reports of 15 Indigenous Activists Killed

Ecuatorian President Sixto Duran-Ballen declared a State of Emergency on June 21 and the following day gave the military sweeping powers to "restore order" throughout the country. Indigenous organizations led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) are blockading roads and demonstrating to demand the government revoke the new agricultural development law. The military has surrounded CONAIE offices and are seeking arrest of the organization's leaders who are now in hiding. Increased repression is feared.

The Ecuadorian government ignored repeated calls by CONAIE and popular organizations for national consultations on proposed agricultural bills. Instead it swiftly approved new legislation on June 13. President Duran-Ballen claims the new law will modernize the country's agricultural sector. Indigenous organizations called the law unconstitutional, stating that it will destroy their agricultural economy, threaten Indigenous systems of land tenure, and drive thousands to immigrate to city slums in search of work. Today, the country's constitutional court ruled the new law to be unconstitutional, but observers think the government may ignore this ruling.

CONAIE organized a massive "Mobilization for Life" to demand the law be revoked. The mobilization has nearly paralyzed nine of 21 Ecuadorian provinces. This is the fourth nationwide mobilization led by CONAIE since the well-known Indian uprising in 1990. In a gesture that was both symbolic and concrete, CONAIE has stalled the flow of agricultural goods to several cities. The government stated that three year sentences would be given to those protesters who disobeyed the state of emergency. CONAIE responded, "The decision of our grassroots is to remain where they are until the law is repealed. If all the dimensions of the conflict are taken into account, the imposition of a state of emergency is a virtual declaration of war against the Indigenous people and the majority of the country."

Five Indigenous protesters have been killed in the highlands, and there are unconfirmed reports that 10 people were killed by police while peacefully blocking a road to an oil well in Lago Agrio in the Amazon. The number of those injured and detained is unknown. A radio station in Latacunga belonging to the Catholic Church was occupied and ransacked by security forces, and one of the staff detained. Protesters have been harassed and threatened for the last two weeks, and tensions are extremely high.

On June 20, after two weeks of protest, the government invited Indigenous organizations to negotiations, but broke off talks the next day. Indigenous organizations demand that the agricultural law be revoked before negotiating the shape of new legislation. The government would agree only to modifying the new law. CONAIE and the environmental group Accion Ecologica point out that the new law promotes privatization of communal properties, fails to recognize Indigenous systems and concepts of land tenure as legitimate, and will promote agroindustry and livestock grazing at the expense of small farmers who now account for 75% of the country's agricultural production. 🐦

Please send letters to President Duran Ballen urging the Ecuadorian government to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict, to immediately halt repression directed against CONAIE and other Indigenous groups and to respect Indigenous organizations' just demands.

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with copies to:

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