

# A Nineteenth-Century War in the Amazon:

## Indigenous Communities Caught in the Ecuador/Peru Border Dispute

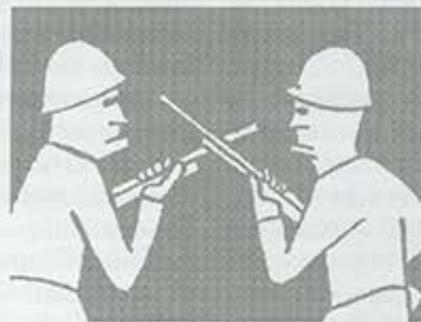
by *Fernando Rivera*

**I**ndigenous people who live in the disputed area between Ecuador and Peru have faced severe hardship and danger during the latest conflict which erupted in January of this year. Forced to fight and caught in wars not of their own design, Indigenous communities in both Ecuador and Peru endured the death of some of their people in battle, the threat of mass starvation, illnesses, and the destruction of their environment.

The recent fighting is an unfortunate continuation of border disputes which have divided the two countries since the wars of independence and is another example of the internal colonialism to which Indigenous peoples are subjected. Each country has based its territorial rights on different treaties and international legal concepts. Each has had its own reasons for waging war. Both Ecuador and Peru, however, have ignored the impact that such land disputes have had on the Indigenous peoples who live along their borders. With every war and every treaty, neither Ecuador nor Peru has been as negatively affected as these Indigenous communities.

The territorial dispute between Ecuador and Peru has been one of the longest and most complicated land disputes on the continent. During colonial times, first the Viceroyalty of Peru and later the Viceroyalty of Gran Colombia administered the Amazonian provinces. In 1829, after gaining

independence, Peru and Gran Colombia signed an agreement in which they did not establish borders, but agreed to respect the former colonial divisions. Since the borders in that region were never clearly defined, their demarcation became a topic of constant debate. In 1941 a war broke out between Ecuador and Peru which ended with the signing of the Río de Janeiro Protocol which sought to define the border between the two countries. In 1950, however, Ecuador declared the Protocol null



and void because of what it believed to be technical differences in demarcating 78 kilometers of land along the Condor Cordillera. In 1981, another war broke out between the two countries. Some analysts believe that the ruling government of Ecuador began that war as a way to distract attention away from its economic problems. Similarly, some analysts believe that President Fujimori may have begun the current war in order to assure his re-election.

Whatever the motive, it is the Indigenous communities along the

Ecuador/Peru border that are the most affected when the two countries decide to go into battle. First, both countries force Indians to fight in the military. This makes neighboring communities along the border and binational communities (communities divided by the border) fight among each other. Much has been said recently about intra-ethnic wars all around the world, but little attention has been paid to the fact that Indian peoples in Ecuador and Peru have been forced to kill each other. Many of these people belong to the same ethnic or cultural groups, as in the case of the Shuar, Achuar, Aguaruna, Huambiza and Quichua Indians.

Second, the toll of the war is felt primarily in Indigenous communities along the border where most of the fighting occurs. Hundreds of families have been displaced by the destruction of their homes, harvests, and cattle. Bombings occur regularly, and deadly diseases are spreading rapidly.

"Indigenous communities have never had borders," says Mino Eusebio Castro, vice-president of AIDSESEP (Indigenous Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon). "What is occurring is that there are conflicting interests between two political groups striving for economic control. We have never been consulted over the creation of borders, yet who do they use when there is a conflict of this type? Who provides the food? Who gets recruited to fight on the front lines? Who gets affected by protecting the borders? It is the Indigenous people!"

Luis Macas, president of CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) reported that the war has directly affected 21 of the 400 Shuar centers (or communities) in the Ecuadorian Amazon because of their proximity to the border. Also, among the 30 Achuar centers, the

11 centers closest to the border have been greatly affected. Furthermore, out of the 25 Quichua communities on both sides of the border (10 in Ecuador and 15 in Peru), the number of affected families reaches 800. Finally, other smaller bordering communities also suffer from the war. These include the Siona, Secoya, Cofán, and the Shiwiar communities. The total number of Indians in Ecuador alone affected by this war reaches 20,000. If the conflict continues, Macas predicts the loss of more Indigenous lives, homes, and livelihoods.

A recent article in the Quito daily *El Comercio* describes the social and economic effect of the war. According to the report, 180 Indigenous communities and approximately 3,000 families "are faced with a social, economic, and psychological crisis because their crops and animals have disappeared and their understanding of their own territory has been changed" since the fighting began. "Life is not the same. Tranquillity has not returned to the selva since the cease-fire," said Luis Yampies, a leader of the Shuar community. "Many communities cannot return to their lands because they are mined. That was a defense strategy by the Ecuadorian military, but we are affected."

In formal and informal declarations, Indigenous groups have denounced the violence and demanded that the governments of Ecuador and Peru stop the war. COICA (The Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin), an umbrella group that represents Indigenous organizations from the eight nation-states with territorial claims in the Amazon Basin, proposed the creation of a bi-national park which would demilitarize the conflict zone and guarantee peace for years to come. The proposal was

born out of an impending need to protect the environment and the desire to re-integrate the Shuar and Achuar communities in Ecuador with their cultural counterparts in Peru—the Aguaruna and the Huambiza Indians.

Another—perhaps more radical—declaration signed by members

of both CONAIE and CONFENIAE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon), demands, among other things, that Ecuador be recognized as a "multinational, multicultural and multilingual country" (see side-

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## Ecuadorian Indigenous Nationalities to the nation and world:

*The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) met in an Encounter of Solidarity for Peace and Dignity in the city of Sucúa, Ecuador, at the headquarters of the Interprovincial Federation of Shuar-Achuar Centers (FICSHA), on February 21-22, 1995. After analyzing recent conflicts between Ecuador and Peru, we declare the following:*

**I**n the countries of Latin America and around the world and, particularly among countries which are in conflict, we comprise a diversity of peoples and cultures which are historically located in our own territories.

The border conflicts that today lead to bloodshed in neighboring populations and destroy their harmony and lifestyles, are not in our interests. Rather, they have led to a stalemate and a deepening poverty for the communities involved.

For these reasons, we Indigenous nationalities propose:

1. That Ecuador be constitutionally recognized as a pluri-national, multi-cultural, and pluri-lingual state, because the recognition of and respect for different peoples is not an obstacle to the unity of a diverse country, but rather a resource that will strengthen its cohesion.

2. In homage to the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples that the United Nations declared, we demand of international organizations and the guarantee nations of the Río Protocol that Indigenous peoples in Ecuador and Peru be included in the peace negotiations as active participants in the search for a definitive solution to the conflict.

3. That the Ecuadorian State permanently suspend the colonization programs in the ancestral lands of the Indigenous nationalities of the Amazon Region.

4. The legalization of Indigenous territories in the border area and in the Amazon Region as a fundamental guarantee of the security and territorial integrity of the country.

5. That the National Parks, Protected Forests, and Forest Reserves be given to and administered directly by Indigenous organizations for the appropriate use and management of their natural resources.

6. That we be repaid for the socio-economic and environmental impacts caused by the war; a guarantee of the return of displaced peoples to their Indigenous communities; and the establishment of a fund for the relatives of civilians killed in the conflict.

7. That the budget for the Intercultural Bilingual Education program be augmented.

## Amazon Forum II

The future of the Amazon depends on its Indigenous peoples and the state of their environment. The Coalition in Support of Amazonian Peoples and Their Environment held its second international forum in Washington, DC, at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History on May 10-12.

The meeting brought together North American non-governmental organizations with representatives from the Amazon Basin to coordinate long-term efforts on behalf of Indigenous and forest-dependent peoples. Secretary-General of the Organization of American States, Cesar Gaviria, and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs at the U.S. Department of the Interior, Ada Deer, gave keynote addresses at a reception welcoming participants on the evening of May 9th.

*For more information on the Amazon Forum, contact: Melina Selverston, Amazon Coalition, 1511 K. Street, NW, #1044, Washington, DC 20005, Tel: (202) 637- 9718, Fax: (202) 637-9719, e-mail: amazoncoal@igc.apc.org.*

## State Frontiers and Indian Nations

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bar (page 7) for extracts from the declaration) to guarantee the integrity and respect for Indigenous peoples.

With all of these declarations, Indigenous leaders reiterate the importance that Indigenous participation should have in peace talks. They rightly point out that a meaningful and lasting peace will not be reached as long as the Indigenous peoples who live in the disputed territories continue to be ignored. Still, the governments of Ecuador and Peru are not listening. The government of Peru, for example, has proposed a plan to strengthen

its borders by giving away Indigenous land to colonizers from different areas of the country.

But peace will not come through the further colonization of Indigenous people. On the contrary, peace will only be achieved when Indigenous land is rightly and justly protected, and the Indigenous way of life secured. A joint declaration from AIDSESEP and CONFENIAE states:

"Nowadays, it is in vogue to speak of integration. However, we have lived for thousands of years in peaceful communion with our Indigenous neighbors on both sides of the border. Furthermore, borders that the white people created have divided communities like the Shuar, Quichua and Cofán. But we continue to feel as though we were part of one Indian continental nation: the ancient Abya Yala." ☺

*Additional declarations and information from Indigenous organizations on this border conflict are in SAIIC's PeaceNet conference [saic.indio](http://saic.indio) as well as on the Internet at: [http://ukanaix.cc.ukans.edu/~marc/geography/latinam/ecuador/border\\_main.html](http://ukanaix.cc.ukans.edu/~marc/geography/latinam/ecuador/border_main.html).*

## Chile, Upper Biobío

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However, because of a lack of resources and interest, this law is not always enforced and large companies such as ENDESA can circumvent the law by, for example, buying land and building houses in other areas, trying to persuade native communities to "sell."

The purpose of the Environmental Bases Law (No. 19,300) is "to regulate all activities that in one way or another affect the environment." However, because the law still lacks specific and definitive legislative language, it is easy for large corporations to act in defiance of the spirit such laws.

As of now, it is apparent that the CNE will recommend the construction of the Ralco power plant without objectively re-evaluating its inevitable effects. In December 1994, the CNE recommended the construction of the plant's gas pipelines. Ralco already has utilization rights on the Biobío River's non-drinkable water, the provisional electrical concession, and engineering studies in their final stages of completion.

Even though the CNE did not include the Ralco power plant in its latest plan of works, the government is about to consent to its construction. If the government does give ENDESA the permission to build Ralco, it will close the possibility for a real environmental evaluation to be conducted. Ralco, like Pangué, will become an example of how the Chilean government allows big corporations to undertake socially and environmentally risky ventures despite the existence of laws that prohibit such projects. A similar multi-dam project during the 1970s, Antuco County on the Laja River, did not make good on its promise. Antuco is today one of poorest counties of Chile.

Public outcry has been massive. Different environmental organizations like GABB (Action Group in Defense of the Biobío), Indigenous rights groups, student activists and other outraged citizens have joined forces to stop the construction of Ralco. In a public declaration, GABB called for a complete halt to any other project along the Biobío River, the enforcement of the Environmental and Indigenous Laws, respect for the Pehuenche communities, their land and culture, and the creation of an effective energy policy that would prioritize the social and ecological sustainability of the country. ☺