

British try to sink Peru-Ecuador peace

by Cynthia R. Rush

At the last minute, on Feb. 5, when Peru and Ecuador were close to signing the cease-fire accord worked out in six days of negotiations in Brasilia, Ecuador's deputy foreign minister suddenly announced that his government needed "more time" to study it. This brought to a stunning end, six days of talks in the Brazilian capital, from Jan. 30 to Feb. 5, where representatives of the two governments were meeting with diplomats from the four guarantor nations belonging to the Rio de Janeiro Protocol group—Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and the United States—in an attempt to halt the armed conflict which has raged between Ecuador and Peru since Jan. 26.

Both countries' armed forces have been clashing in the border region over claims stemming from the war they fought in 1942 and the treaty signed at the time by Peru, Ecuador, and the four guarantors. Ecuador alleges that Peru "stole" one-half of its territory in 1942 and rejects the Rio Protocol's demarcation of the border, which it claims it originally approved "under duress."

After talks broke down, the Rio Protocol guarantors announced they would keep up their efforts to solve the conflict and expressed optimism that an accord could be reached. Since then, intense fighting has continued in the mountainous, rugged border region. Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori pledges that Peru will fully abide by the Rio Protocol, and that his government's goal is not to move into Ecuadorean territory, but to retake positions seized by Ecuadorean troops on Peruvian soil. As of Feb. 7, Fujimori announced that his troops were close to recovering Tiwinza, the last Ecuadorean post inside Peru.

Need for 'imagination'

The import of the diplomatic attempts to settle the armed conflict goes well beyond the two Andean neighbors. Diplomacy has become a form of surrogate warfare in which the Clinton administration is countering Britain's strategic designs for the region, much as it is doing in the war in Bosnia. As a signator of a valid international treaty, the United States is also bound to abide by the Rio Protocol's terms, or else jeopardize its standing as a superpower whose word can be trusted.

The contrary, British view is that such supranational bodies as the Organization of American States (OAS) or the United Nations Security Council (which did a great job prolonging the war in the Balkans) are the proper forums for

handling the conflict. It is being loudly voiced by Britain's diplomatic assets and pro-British media on the continent. One of these, Argentina's Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella, sat out the 1982 Malvinas War between his country and Great Britain, in London! Not accidentally, many of these parrot the demand that Ibero-America's armed forces be dismantled, and accuse Peruvian President Fujimori of having embarked on a "militaristic adventure" to further his own electoral aims.

The United States has made clear that it intends to keep working through the Rio Protocol. State Department spokesman Christine Shelly underscored this on Feb. 7, as did Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Alexander Watson, who represents the United States in the guarantor group. Watson noted that while the situation may be difficult for the Ecuadorans, the United States was awaiting their response to the cease-fire proposal put forward by the Peruvian and Ecuadorean deputy foreign ministers and the four guarantor representatives at Brasilia. "I'm confident that with some imagination they can find a way" to accept it, he said. The ongoing conflict is a "tragedy" for the region, Watson added.

Thus far, Ecuador has acted the saboteur's part. The Quito regime contends (as do the British) that the OAS and the U.N. should mediate the conflict. President Durán called up Secretary of State Warren Christopher on Feb. 6 to complain that the United States was taking Peru's side, allegedly because Watson had previously served as the U.S. ambassador in Lima. Heinz Moeller, the president of Ecuador's Congress, who came to Washington to meet with State Department and other Clinton administration officials, fretted to the British press service Reuters, "The guarantors totally favor Peru . . . [they] back what is an old, irrational, unjust and absurd Peruvian aspiration. . . . I am frustrated with the attitude of the State Department representative [Watson]." Ecuador has the ability to hold its military positions "for a very long time," he threatened.

Reuters has also run reports of Ecuador-U.S. confrontation, citing an anonymous Ecuadorean official charging that "we are under threats of international isolation from the United States, unless we sign the Rio Protocol proposal" for a cease-fire. Later the Durán government issued a denial of the report.

As soon as the Brasilia talks were suspended, Durán undertook his own tour of three of the guarantor nations. He announced a counter-proposal for a cease-fire which reduced the five mile-wide demilitarized zone in the proposal to a half-mile zone. Reportedly, Ecuador also wanted to keep its military posts inside the disputed area. Peru's Foreign Minister Efraín Goldenberg rejected the plan as "completely impertinent." The cease-fire worked out in Brasilia called for a total demilitarization of the theater of conflict, and for setting up an observer mission by the guarantor nations to assist in enforcing the cease-fire terms.