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Ecuador

“There exists the danger of a civil war”

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Antonio Vargas is a leader of the powerful Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Conaie). He was interviewed by Mercedes López.

What are the differences and the similarities between the Conaie and the Zapatista movement?

The social and economic problems are the same. The difference lies in how one acts according to the geographical situation one encounters. For this reason the struggles have been different. The EZLN wage their struggle in one state only (Chiapas) and not at the national level. Perhaps because Ecuador is a very small country, we control nearly all the parts of the country where the indigenous problematic exists. Otherwise the Zapatistas have the same demands as us concerning indigenous poverty.

The Zapatistas have arrived at the end of their long march to Mexico City. What are you going to do with your roadblocks?

We have carried out several uprisings. The last was the toughest, and there exists the danger of a civil war if the government and the politicians do not change their attitude. It could be that a new uprising ends up in a social explosion or in a civil war. We have begun the dialogue and we hope that it works.

What are the main themes for the formal dialogue with the government?

The immediate problems are compensation for the wounded and dead, reversing the price increases [of basic commodities] and fulfilment of agreements made and others not yet signed. The long-term themes are the foreign debt, 'Plan Colombia', emigration. In short, we are asking for changes in economic and social policy.

What about 'Plan Colombia'?

We have opposed it from the beginning but lamentably Ecuador is already involved in 'Plan Colombia'. We think that this will lead to a situation such as occurred in equatorial Africa and in Vietnam, because it is a long term problem and could start a Third World War. That is, it is not only a matter for Ecuador - it also jeopardises the whole of South America.

Why do you want to engage in dialogue with the government at the headquarters of the United Nations (UN)? Would it amount to being recognized by the UN as a belligerent party?

Many negotiations that we have carried out at government headquarters have not been fruitful. This indicates to us that we need a sort of witness, for that we want the UN to participate in the dialogue, so that it is effective. In that way, we will verify the fulfilment of the agreements obtained.

Is there some degree of support for Conaie from medium ranking army officers?

Not on the part of the army. However 85% of the Ecuadorian population endorses the indigenous cause.

“There exists the danger of a civil war”

I'm talking about, for example, the case of Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, who last year headed the assault on the state parliament, prior to the coup d'etat.

We have nothing to do with Lucio and his politics. Yes, we have the endorsement of some dissident colonels.

What is your position on dollarisation?

We have always been against it, first, because we defend monetary sovereignty, second because each year we are going to carry on paying US\$500 million for the sovereignty of the currency and third, because following dollarisation in Ecuador inflation has not fallen, on the contrary, prices have gone up! Nobody has gained through dollarisation.

What are the demands of the Conaie in relation to tax reform and the law on social security?

With respect to the tax reform, we do not agree with the raising of VAT (value-added-tax). In addition, we want the customs to be controlled by the internal services, not by private companies. As for social security, we are asking for guarantees that it is not only for a privileged group and that the government includes the majority of the population in its reforms.

What do you think will be the response of the government?

I'm not going to be pessimistic, I hope that there are results but I won't get ahead of myself, the future will have the final word.

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