

ECUADOR:

Protests Against Anti-Drug Crop Spraying Across Border Heat Up

Raúl Pierri

MONTEVIDEO, Sep 25 (IPS) - Campesinos and indigenous people who live along the northern border of Ecuador are demanding that the government and the courts take effective action to stop the anti-drug crop spraying carried out under Plan Colombia right across the border, complaining about damaging effects to their health and their food crops.

More than 100 people from the northern Amazon jungle province of Sucumbíos held a protest in Quito Thursday and Friday calling for the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry to demand that Bogota stop the aerial spraying of coca and poppy plantations with herbicides, which they say is carried out as close as 10 kms from the border.

On Friday, the demonstrators sprayed the plants surrounding the Foreign Ministry with glyphosate, the herbicide most widely used in the spraying in Colombia, while they showed reporters their skin lesions, which they said were caused by the toxic chemicals.

Meanwhile, the Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) filed an amicus curiae brief Wednesday before the Constitutional Court in Quito to support a request for the Ecuadorian state to explain what actions it has taken to protect the country's citizens from the effects of the fumigations.

The amicus curiae brief presented in this case is a scientific study that details the impact of spraying with different herbicides, to back the demand by the Federation of Campesino Organisations from the Border Zone, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and other groups.

"We have engaged in dialogue with a representative of the government, but his response was not satisfactory," Daniel Alarcón, the president of the Federation of Campesino Organisations, told IPS by telephone Friday.

"At this very moment we are returning to Sucumbíos because many of us are tired, but it's pretty sure that we'll come back next week" to continue protesting, he added.

The activist said officials had assured him that the spraying had already been suspended within an area of 10 kms or less from the border. "But they did not offer any evidence of that," said Alarcón.

The campesinos are also demanding cancellation of a nine-million dollar debt they owe to the National Development Bank, arguing that they cannot pay it back because the spraying destroyed their crops.

Ecuador's Deputy Foreign Minister Edwin Johnson told IPS that the protests do not represent the entire population of Sucumbíos, but "certain groups that are making these demands with an ulterior motive: gaining indemnification."

He argued that the lesions shown by the indigenous protesters are a symptom of diseases that are typical of the Amazon jungle region, rather than a consequence of aerial fumigations in Colombia.

Johnson said that a year ago, the Colombian air force stopped spraying drug crops within 10 kms of the border, because "it is no longer necessary."

A series of scientific studies ordered along the border by the governments of Ecuador and Colombia with the support of United Nations and Organisation of American States institutions and agencies concluded that the spraying posed no dangers, he said.

That body of information was presented to the Constitutional Court, and "the issue is closed," he added.

Alarcón, however, announced that the campesinos would continue to press their demands with the Constitutional Court, especially now that the FIDH has presented a report that substantiates their claims.

We hope this amicus curiae brief helps the Constitutional Court reach a decision that is in line with health safety standards and principles and environmental law, and that it orders the Ecuadorian state to take the necessary measures to repair the damages caused, FIDH president Sidiki Kaba said this week.

Glyphosate first began to be used in Latin America 25 years ago. It is mainly sold as Round-up, the brand name given it by the biotech giant Monsanto, which reports 1.2 billion dollars a year in sales of the herbicide.

It is classified as a category III herbicide in terms of toxicity, which means great caution must be used when it is employed, because it can cause gastrointestinal problems, vomiting, swelling of the lungs, pneumonia, and destruction of red blood cells.

The Plan Colombia anti-drug and counterinsurgency strategy was launched in 2000 by then presidents Andrés Pastrana of Colombia and Bill Clinton of the United States, with 1.3 billion dollars in U.S. financing.

Current U.S. President George W. Bush requested additional funding the following year through the Andean Regional Initiative. Washington claims that aerial spraying is a safe, effective way of eradicating illegal crops of coca, the raw material used to produce cocaine, and poppies, used to produce morphine and heroin.

But dangerous chemicals "which have not been previously tested are sprayed directly over people, schools and villages," Adolfo Maldonado, a Spanish doctor specialising in

tropical medicine and researcher with the Ecuadorian environmental group Ecological Action, told IPS in a telephone interview.

"The effect of glyphosate is multiplied by a factor of 22 when it is mixed with other substances. In Colombia it is mixed with Cosmo Flux 411, whose impact (on human health) has not yet been studied," said Maldonado.

In the past few years, Maldonado has carried out several studies along the border with Colombia, in which he found serious detrimental effects suffered by the local population.

"The toxicity has direct effects. The toxic elements break down the layer of fat under the skin which, in a tropical environment and with poor sanitation, facilitates infections and the spread of funguses," said the researcher, one of the authors of the amicus curiae brief presented by the FIDH.

Maldonado explained the spraying is carried out by planes or helicopters from a height of between 15 and 60 metres, which allows the wind to easily disperse the chemicals, thus causing serious respiratory problems, like pneumonia.

Consuming food and water contaminated with glyphosate also causes diarrhea and vomiting.

"The Health Ministry said three years ago that the border area was a dangerous place and it could not put its functionaries at risk. The local population is completely neglected, without any health care, and without any possibility of leaving. The situation is deplorable," said Maldonado.

"The local people used to turn to traditional medicines, but now they realise that the plants no longer help because they are contaminated too," he added.

Ecological Action blames at least 12 deaths on the fumigation, since it began across the border in civil war-torn Colombia in 2000. The majority of the victims were children and elderly people with weakened immune systems.

In one of his studies, Maldonado found a direct correlation between the spraying carried out under Plan Colombia and genetic damages among Ecuadorian women who live along the border.

"These cellular damages will lead to the appearance of congenital malformations in future generations," he said. (END/2004)