

## In the Grip of the Anaconda

If Plan Colombia is an anaconda trying to wrap its coils around Latin America, Ecuador is already in its grip: The United States has turned Manta Air Force Base on the Pacific Coast into a key link in its region-wide air surveillance system. Northeast Ecuador's border regions are in danger of becoming new zones of conflict as Colombian drug traffickers, guerrillas, military and paramilitary forces filter into border towns, and civilian refugees scatter. Many Ecuadorians are protesting their nation's role in Plan Colombia. It puts the squeeze, they believe, on Ecuador's peace and sovereignty and could have serious environmental effects, even as it furthers neoliberal economic goals and U.S. security interests that go well beyond fighting drugs.

Ecuador's involvement in the U.S. drug war grew out of a series of international agreements that culminated in a 1999 accord for what the U.S. military refers to as a Forward Operating Location (FOL) at the Manta base.<sup>1</sup> When Howard Air Force Base in Panama closed that same year, the U.S. Southern Command began opening FOLs at existing Latin American and Caribbean airfields. These were designed to take over the reconnaissance and surveillance operations formerly centered at Howard.

A report by the Ecuadorian Ministries of Foreign Relations and Defense made the case for the FOL presence at Manta in U.S. terms: With Howard closed, the United States needs Manta. Ecuador increasingly depends on exports to the U. S. and should not jeopardize this relationship. The country has shifted from being a mere transit route for illicit drugs to being a producer—an alarmist assertion, but one that echoes U.S. State Department reports. Without the accord, developed countries may suspect that Ecuador does not have its heart in the struggle against drugs. Ecuador was selected, the ministers boast, for its strategic location and for the security it offers, since Ecuador has no "serious problems of violence and terrorism."<sup>2</sup>

In his 2000 book, *Plan Colombia: La paz armada* (the Armed Peace), Uruguayan journalist Kintto Lucas suggests other motives behind Manta's creation. As evidence that the U.S. surveillance operations based there are not just aimed at drug traffickers, Lucas cites the June 2000 case in which the United States warship Hali Burton detained a fishing boat carrying 190 undocumented immigrants bound for the United States from Ecuador's southern provinces of Cañar and Loja. An intelligence flight originating in Manta had alerted the

warship to the boat's presence, a violation of terms that Manta should only be used to combat narcotrafficking. Lucas notes that the United States had urged the intervention of Ecuadorian and Peruvian troops in Colombia's internal conflict, had transferred U.S. Special Forces to Peruvian and Ecuadorian locations along the Colombian border, and, in July 1999, mobilized 24 U.S. planes stationed in the Ecuadorian Amazon to rescue a U.S. RC-7B military aircraft that had crashed in Colombia. The refusal of a White House functionary to reveal whether or not the plane was part of a covert operation confirmed Lucas' suspicions that Manta could well involve Ecuador further in the Colombian counterinsurgency.<sup>3</sup>

Oil and economic ties contribute to U.S. concerns about regional insurgencies and social disorder. A 1999 report by the Ecuadorian Joint Military Command recommended special measures to protect U.S. oil facilities against paramilitary members and left wing guerrillas infiltrating from Colombia.<sup>4</sup> The kidnapping and murder of oil technician Ron Sander on January 31 in Lago Agrio, a frontier town just across the border from Colombia's conflict-ridden Putumayo region, reinforced oil companies' fears of social breakdown in the area.<sup>5</sup> Lago Agrio has become infiltrated by criminal gangs, some connected to drug traffickers, and has recently become a favored retreat for Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), United Self-Defense Units of Colombia (AUC) and U.S. Special Forces members.<sup>6</sup>

The proximity of the Colombian conflict zone is affecting the lives of all Ecuadorians in the border region, but the indigenous rainforest-dwelling Cofan are especially hard hit. Some 1,400 Cofan survive, mostly in Ecuador, but some live in Colombia. In Ecuador, most of the Cofan habitat had already fallen to oil exploration and colonization. Tourism was the Ecuadorian Cofans' only source of cash income, but news of the regional conflict has caused tourists to stop coming. The decline of tourism, along with a recent collapse in the price of coffee grown in rainforest clearings, may help make the region ripe for drug interests to invade.<sup>7</sup>

According to Randy Borman, Director of the Foundation for the Survival of the Cofan, some 45 Cofan families left Colombia for Ecuador for a variety of motives—including threats by AUC paramilitaries—in early February of this year. They joined relatives and hundreds of Kichwa and Shuar on the Ecuadorian side who were also threatened by AUC in the towns of La Bermeja, Curiyacu, Shiguango, Tarupa and Malvinas in the Amazonian border province of Sucumbios. Some Cofan took up encampments along rivers and some gathered in Cascales and Jambelí with other refugees. Others fled to remote reserves or parts unknown.<sup>8</sup>

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**If Colombia becomes "the next Vietnam," Ecuadorians fear, Ecuador could become "the next Cambodia."**

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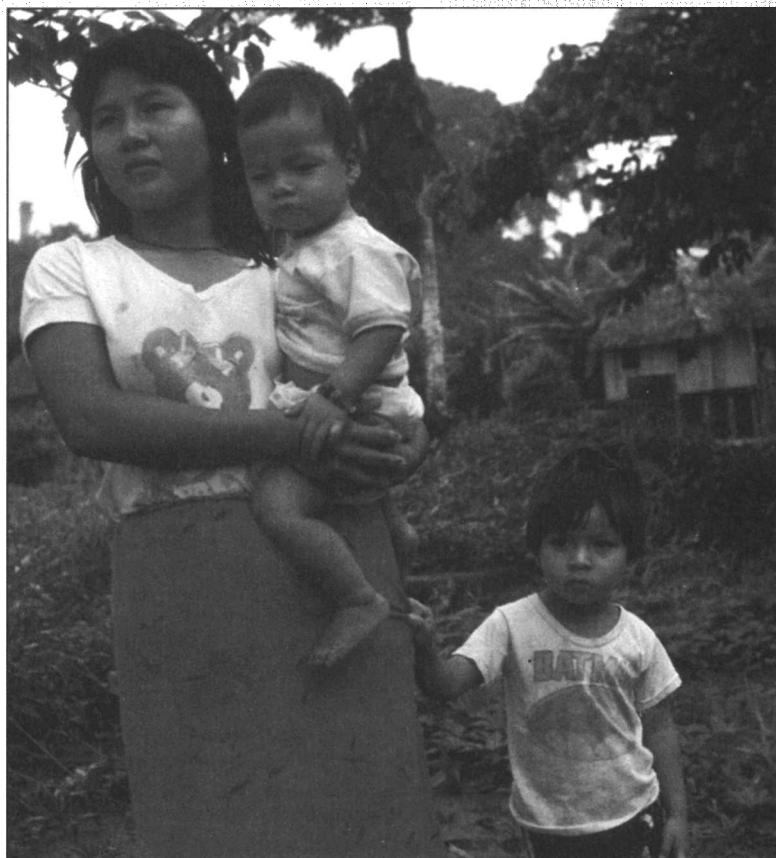
BY PHILIP BANNOWSKY

The \$80 million in Plan Colombia allocated for Ecuador includes nothing for refugees.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the \$1.23 million in U.S. aid for Ecuador's indigenous peoples is habitually "scarfed up," according to Borman, by aid professionals like Subir/Care.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, Borman sees conditions for the Cofan worsening with the withdrawal of FARC guerillas from Ecuador to safe havens in Colombia, since the FARC had not interfered with the Cofan and because blood-thirsty AUC paramilitaries may fill the vacuum.<sup>11</sup>

If Colombia becomes "the next Vietnam," Ecuadorians fear, Ecuador could be "the next Cambodia"—Vietnam's neighbor pulled into the conflict that eventually enveloped most of Southeast Asia. One striking parallel with Southeast Asia is the possibility of widespread rainforest destruction. In Southeast Asia, U.S. forces cleared the jungle with chemical defoliants like Agent Orange; in the Andean region, U.S.-funded coca eradication programs make intensive use of a variety of powerful herbicides. Last October, Ecuadorian farmers from General Farfán and Puerto el Carmen, villages along the banks of the San Miguel River in Sucumbios, reported

damaged crops, sore eyes, and headaches during an herbicide application in nearby Colombia.<sup>12</sup> There is little coca being grown in Ecuador now, but that could change quickly if eradication in Colombia causes cocaine producers to seek out new suppliers. The advent of large-scale Ecuadorian coca farming would surely be followed by U.S. pressure to carry out a large-scale aerial eradication program.

In the meantime, Ecuadorian opposition to Plan Colombia grows. In July 2000 an alliance of activists, inspired by Puerto Rican resistance to the bombing of Vieques, breached the security gates at Manta, exposing the base's vulnerability.<sup>13</sup> When indigenous organizations and their allies in the Social Movement Coordinating Committee shut down Ecuador in a nation-wide campaign of civil disobedience in February of this year, they included among their economic and political demands a call for Ecuador to withdraw from Plan Colombia. The Coordinating Committee sees Plan Colombia as part of the same process as the dollarization of the currency and the privatization of transportation in the neoliberal agenda to limit Ecuadorian sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Among the concessions the government finally made to the protesters was an agreement "not



*A family from the Cofan indigenous community in Comuna Zabalo, Ecuador.*

to permit the regionalization of Plan Colombia, nor involve the country in a foreign conflict," a point to be included in later discussions of indemnification by the United States and Colombia for damages to Ecuadorian society, economy and environment.<sup>15</sup>

In February of last year a hitherto unknown group calling itself the People's Liberation Army took responsibility for several letter bombs mailed to supporters of neoliberal programs and the Manta accord. These were, however, widely held to be the work of the far right, as were bombs exploded in front of banks during February's nationwide protests. The bombings were dubbed "fantasmas de violencia" (phantoms of violence) and were believed to be provocations aimed at discrediting the protest campaign's commitment to nonviolence and justifying further militarization and repression.<sup>16</sup>

The government has not honored many of its February concessions, and it has not followed up on its agreements regarding Plan Colombia. Though policy makers in Washington and Quito seem to be paying little attention to opposition to the plan, resistance to the U.S. stranglehold is becoming a powerful force across Ecuador. If it continues with its unthinking gluttony, the anaconda could be in for a surprise. ■

## NOTES

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13. "The 2000 Report of the Department of State on International Narcotic Control Strategy" cited in "Los Cocaleros Preparan Medidas de Resistencia," *Los Tiempos* (Cochabamba), March 5, 2001.
14. See Catherine Allen, *The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1988) for a detailed account of the role of coca in Andean life.
15. Linda Farthing, "Carrots for Coke," *This Magazine* (Toronto), October 1992. In 1998, Robert Lessman, approached one of the agencies working on alternative development, the Bolivian Institute for Agricultural Technology (IBTA) with a proposal to market pepper through a German spice company. The company had been impressed by the samples from the Chapare they had seen, and were interested in buying the entire harvest. Even though the income from pepper production is potentially twice per hectare of that of the coca, Lessman found that IBTA officials had no marketing plan for pepper, no one competent to negotiate with the spice company and inaccurate figures about production levels. As a consequence, the proposal went nowhere. See Robert Lessman, "Where the Pepper Does Not Grow," *Drugs and Development*, No. 10, July-August 1998, in the European NGO Council on Drugs and Development Website: <<[www.tni.org/drugs/encod/dyd.htm](http://www.tni.org/drugs/encod/dyd.htm)>>.
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### In the Grip of the Anaconda

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11. Author interview with Randy Borman.
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1. "Does free Market Reform Unintentionally Undermine Drug Market Prohibition? The U.S.-Mexico Experience," Testimony of Peter Andreas, Research Fellow, the Brookings Institution, before the House Subcommittee on Crime, U.S. House of Representatives, January 25, 1996.
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3. The 60+ page Federal Reserve document originally filed on the case found that Carlos Hank Rhon violated banking laws.
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7. Telephone interview with Donald Schulz, April 2001.
8. Letter from Schulz to American Political Science Association, December 2000. Published on <<[www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org)>>.
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