

COLOMBIA-ECUADOR- Panic Along the Border (Constanza Vieira, IPS)

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03/02/06 - [IPS](#) - *"The bullets and shell casings were falling like hail" in the Ecuadorian village of Barranca Bermeja near the Colombian border during a recent incursion by the Colombian air force, said terrified local residents.*

The Ecuadorian government, which says the attack was intentional and "premeditated," has issued its third formal protest since November over incursions into its national territory, and announced that it would send warplanes to safeguard its northern border.

The Colombian government of Álvaro Uribe, meanwhile, is awaiting the report of a binational military commission before responding to Ecuador's protest.

According to eyewitnesses from the area, where 70 percent of residents are Colombians, three Black Hawk helicopters, two warplanes and a radar plane took part in the incursion Saturday.

The aircraft form part of the U.S.-financed Plan Colombia counterinsurgency and anti-drug strategy, and its military phase, Plan Patriot, which are fighting the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in southern Colombia, near the border area in question.

Ecuador has declared itself neutral in Colombia's four-decade civil war, and Ecuadorian military authorities stress that they have not authorised the neighbouring country's armed forces to cross the border, even if they are in "hot pursuit" of the enemy.

During the reported incursion into Ecuador, one of the helicopters and one of the planes also opened fire several times on a boat that was motoring along the San Miguel River, which forms part of the border between the two South American nations.

The boat was carrying members of the Binational Committee of Towns along the Ecuador-Colombia Border, which represents 250 grassroots and community groups from the Ecuadorian province of Sucumbíos and 240 rural villages from along the border in the Colombian departments (provinces) of Putumayo and Nariño.

Leaders of the Binational Committee were in the area to verify reports that Ecuadorian airspace had been violated by the Colombian military on a previous occasion.

The Colombian military aircraft "began to fly in circles over the boat" and the shots "landed in the water just a few centimetres on either side" of the vessel, said a statement issued by the Committee, which was distributed by Altercom, an Ecuadorian news agency.

"With the din of the automatic fire from the aircraft, children who were traveling in the boat to a nearby farm began to cry in terror, which forced us to pull up on the Colombian side of the river, because there was a lot of machine-gun fire from the Ecuadorian side," said the communiqué.

"At that moment, a woman with a little girl in her arms came out, shouting desperately. Hearing the boat arrive, she asked us to take her away," because the Colombian side of the river was also being targeted by the automatic fire. On its way back to Ecuador, the boat had a mechanical problem, "and we were stuck for quite a while, as the machine-gun fire continued," the Committee members added.

"In the midst of the fear and panic, we decided to take off our white shirts and other garments and wave them as a sign of peace, to show that we were civilians. But that did not work, and they continued attacking us.

"Using the force of the current we continued downstream, while still waving our white clothing, but the harassment from the air continued until we reached Barranca Bermeja," said the statement.

"On our return to Barranca Bermeja, we found that the local residents had fled in terror to Santa Rosa, a town that is farther from the border," lawyer Ernesto García, a member of the Binational Committee who was traveling in the boat, told IPS by telephone.

During the shooting, "the roof of the home of Mr. Ciro Tapieiro, out of which he runs a small grocery shop and a simple café, was damaged," said the Committee.

"There were no irregular Colombian fighters around, at least between 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM, when we were there," added García, who lives in Lago Agrío, Ecuador.

Nor had local residents heard or seen any fighting on the Colombian side of the border before the aircraft opened fire on and around the village on Saturday.

According to a communiqué released by La Comuna, a social organisation in Quito, the Colombian army transported between 220 and 360 troops in 11 Black Hawk helicopters to Ecuadorian territory between 9:00 and 11:00 AM local time on Saturday. The troops were reportedly brought in to carry out an operation to comb the area for FARC insurgents.

"That is what the people of Barranca Bermeja have told me. I myself have no evidence of that," said García.

"Barranca Bermeja was bombarded within a five-kilometre radius. As proof of that we have around 50 shell casings" from .50 machine guns, he added, explaining that each bullet is almost as long as a man's hand.

At the spot where the shooting occurred, the San Miguel River is around 80 metres wide. "That leads us to assume that the aerial attack was intentional and planned with full premeditation and knowledge," said Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Francisco Carrión.

"One illegal phenomenon (the guerrillas) cannot be combated with another," Ecuadorian Defence Minister Oswaldo Jarrín told La W, a Colombian radio station.

The Ecuadorian army arrived in Barranca Bermeja at 4:00 PM Saturday, seven hours after the start of the attacks on civilians, said García, contradicting Ecuadorian authorities, who reported that the army immediately showed up.

The Binational Committee of Towns was founded in October in Sucumbíos during a meeting held by residents from the border area, "to fight against the violation of sovereignty, the free trade treaty (that Ecuador and Colombia are negotiating with the United States) and oil industry policies," García explained.