

Anglican bishop ends hunger strike opposing Ecuador's religious teaching law

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Ecuador's Anglican Archbishop Walter Crespo has stopped his hunger strike in opposition to the country's new religious teaching law. Crespo ended the action on January 8, one week after he began.

Crespo told NNI that he felt his strike had called attention to his concerns about the new legislation.

Ecuador's new law mandates two hours of religious teaching per week in all of the country's public and private schools.

Crespo had said that he would continue the action until the nation's congress annulled the law passed last year.

Various human rights groups had asked the archbishop to terminate his fast. Crespo said he would lead a national hunger strike in the next few weeks if congress takes no further action.

The Front for the Defense of Laity said it has been seeking one million signatures on a petition asking congress to annul the legislation. Crespo, who coordinates the Front, said that proposed legislation and the petition would be presented to congress late on January 11.

Mass demonstrations and marches were planned for January 27, with a special ecumenical service scheduled for January 28.

Meanwhile, Ecuador's newly designated Cardinal, Monsignor Bernardino Echeverria met with representatives of the Front on January 10 to try to overcome deep divisions which have developed in the country over the law. Front representative asked Echeverria to encourage the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic) to withdraw its support of the law. The legislation was originally written and introduced by the Conference.

Meanwhile, leaders of a national organization formed to support the new law have criticized the Anglican archbishop for his hunger strike and for calling for massive disobedience of the law.

Francisco Salazar Alvarado, national coordinator of the group, said the bishop was seeking notoriety in place of promoting national peace and harmony. He said that promoting civil disobedience violates Ecuador's laws and would be punished.

The controversy surrounding the bishop's actions came amidst massive street demonstrations throughout the country protesting the law and recent bus fare increases which left one student dead, and a number of students and police injured.

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