

Anglican bishop begins hunger strike to oppose Ecuador religious teaching law

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Ecuador's Anglican Archbishop Walter Crespo began a hunger strike on January 1 to oppose the country's new religious education law. His action came at a time of growing dissent among various groups in the face of a ruling by Ecuador's Supreme Court which found the law to be constitutional.

The Front for the Defense of Laity, a coalition of 48 Protestant churches, teacher's unions and other groups coordinated by Archbishop Crespo has demanded that the congress repeal the law, and a legislator has filed suit against the three court judges who decided in favor of the law.

The legislation, which was proposed by the Roman Catholic Church, mandates two hours per week of religious teaching in all of the country's schools. The Supreme Court decided by a vote of 3-2 in December that the law was constitutional.

Archbishop Crespo said that "this controversial law has generated a useless confrontation between Ecuadorians involved in byzantine religious discussions, when the terrible problems of the country are economic, political and social issues".

The archbishop repudiated the decision of the court, saying it was not a Christmas gift, but bad left-over from the old year.

Anglican officials said that various religious organizations supported the action of the bishop, including some Catholic groups. Crespo's hunger strike is being supervised by a medical team supplied by the government and human rights observers.

The day before he began his hunger strike, Crespo spent the day in prayer and conferences with his supporters. He said he would continue his strike until the congress repeals the legislation.

Legislation to repeal the new law has been prepared by the Law Faculty of the Central University in Quito, and according to supporters has been signed by over a million Ecuadorians who oppose the law.

The Front in Defense of Laity has restated its intention to promote civil disobedience in opposition to the law, starting with a nation wide protest on January 27 organized by teachers, students, parents and labor unions.

January 28 is the observance of the assassination of General Eloy Alfaro, the president of Ecuador who rewrote the constitution guaranteeing freedom of religion to all groups almost 100 years ago.

Front president, Gustavo Teran said that the project to repeal the law is supported by several political parties, including the Democratic Left.

Meanwhile, an Anglican spokesman, Archbishop Neptali Larrea said that while his denomination is opposed to the new law, it does not support massive civil disobedience. "We will not participate in an uprising", he said, "but we will defend the rights of the minority. We will resist the teaching of (mandatory) religious classes in our schools.

Larrea said the Episcopal Church opposes the law because it limits free practice of religion, and is intolerant to the private practices of individual families.

The archbishop said the law is a doctrinal imposition by the Catholic church.

Meanwhile, Ivan Rodriguez, a member of congress representing the Popular Democratic Movement party has filed suit against the three members of the Supreme Court who voted in favor of the constitutionality of the new law.

Rodriguez said the justices had violated six articles of the constitution and an article of the Budget law which he said prohibit governmental support of religion, and commit the government to expenditures for which it does not have financial resources.

He said it is strange for those who are called to defend the law and to respect constitutional concepts to be the first to violate that call.

A negative judgement against the judges would remove them from office.

The National Educators Union (UNE) has reaffirmed its intention to participate in civil disobedience. UNE president Carlos Medina said that disobedience would demonstrate that "we are not in accord with the law, which is unconstitutional and an attack against lay education, the liberty of worship and the consecration of religion in the constitution".

Medina said the union would not permit religious teachers in the schools unless they are currently teaching.

The union official questioned how the government can implement the law when it does not have enough teachers or money to carry out already existing programs.

Ecuador's minister of Education, Fausto Segovia, announced his decision to postpone implementation of the law for one year. He said that there is currently no legislation to apply the law. He also said the government needs to develop a curriculum and recruit and train teachers.

Cesar Parra, a spokesman for evangelical groups in Ecuador said that the government would need to select and train 6,800 new teachers to comply with the law. Catholic officials have said that Catholic universities and seminaries would train the teachers.

Educators have also raised questions about the application of the law. Mario Cepeda, the Rector of Juan Montalvo High School and

Junior College in Quito said that the school schedules are already full, and it will be difficult to schedule two additional hours of classes per week. Second, Cepeda said that there are not currently enough teachers to conduct the classes, and his school will have to hire "dozens more" to provide the necessary instruction.

Edwin Guerrero Blum, Rector of Mejia National High School in Quito said the new law will bring religious war in the country, and will increase social conflict. He said it will be impossible to put the law into practice, and that it was passed without any thought as to financing.

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