

Ecuadorian religious teaching law hits rocky road

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Ecuador's Roman Catholic leaders are charging government officials with delay in implementation and failure to fund a controversial religious teaching law. Meanwhile, a major teacher's union has reaffirmed its intention to disobey the law.

The Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference has demanded that the Ecuadorian government establish a special budget to fund the program, which some experts say will cost more than seven million dollars a year to implement. It has also requested President Sixto Duran Ballen to act on implementation regulations which were passed by congress last July, but have not been implemented.

Church officials also charged that the government has not developed a curriculum for the program, though some government and church leaders say that should be the responsibility of the church.

The law mandates two hours per week of religious teaching in all private and public schools at government expense.

One reason given for a seven month delay in implementation of the program is ongoing negotiations with Protestants and other groups who have vigorously opposed the legislation.

Fausto Segovia, Minister of Education, said that the law guarantees the freedom of families to choose which religious classes their children would attend, or whether they will attend the classes.

Segovia suggested that those who opt out of religious classes would attend sessions on moral values.

Church officials said that conservative estimates indicate 5,000 new teachers would need to be hired for teaching the classes on the elementary and high school levels. The Latin American Council of Churches said that 6,800 would be needed. Teacher's unions charge that the number could reach 8,000 when non-Catholic groups which wish to be represented are included. Government records indicate that there are 598 registered non-Catholic denominations in the country.

Official statistics say that 94.4% of all Ecuadorians are Catholic, 3% Protestant, 2% non-professing, and .2% in other groups.

The National Educators Union, Ecuador's largest teacher's union, reaffirmed on July 26 their opposition to the law and their planned disobedience if assigned to teach the classes.

Union officials joined church leaders in charging that the government has not budgeted any money for the classes, and questioned how a country deeply in debt from a recently concluded border war with neighboring Peru can afford to finance such an undertaking.

The union charged that there are currently 1,800 schools in Ecuador which are closed because of lack of money and teachers.

Church officials also charged the government with failure to develop a curriculum. At the same time, the church said it has written a proposed curriculum, but government officials said the church has not submitted it for consideration.

Church leaders say it will take at least 12 years to fully implement the educational program. They said they are ready to test out their program in 236 pilot schools in Ecuador's coastal region.

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