

New Ecuador law requiring religious teaching in schools delayed by war and lack of resources

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Ecuador's new legislation which mandates two hours of religious teaching in all primary and secondary schools has been delayed by a brief war and the lack of sufficient resources.

Implementation of the law, which was passed late last year, was delayed by the border conflict between Ecuador and Peru in January and February. A State of Emergency, which remains in effect, banned any demonstrations or marches against the law or other issues. While the State of Emergency continues, strikes and demonstrations have resumed around the country in opposition to new taxes imposed to pay war costs and the religious teaching law.

The law was passed by Congress and signed by President Sixto Duran-Ballen. Later it was declared constitutional by the Supreme Court, but that decision merely prompted more discussion and opposition from Protestant denominations, teacher's unions and other groups.

Monsignor Antonio Arregui, secretary general of the Ecuador Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic) said the classes should have begun in May with the opening of the new school year in the coastal region of the country. Classes in the mountainous region of the country begin their school year in October.

Fr. Arregui said that several factors have delayed implementation of the law in addition to the conflict. He sighted the failure of congress to provide a budget for the classes, the absence of implementing regulations from the Ministry of Education, and no plan for training teachers.

The priest said he was optimistic because the church was moving forward on a plan to develop its own curriculum and training program. In an assembly in May, the country's bishops reviewed possible curriculum and text books for the classes.

During the delay in implementation of the classes, Monsignor Arregui said the church has been working on the training of its own teachers who will offer classes in both church-related and public schools.

So far, the church says it has trained 540 teachers along the coast.

Arregui said that the church will begin with pilot programs in some schools, expanding the program to all schools eventually as required in the law. He said the church is trying to obtain foreign financial help for the training.

The law requires that the government finance the religious classes in both public and private schools. However, facing up to a \$350 million bill for the recent conflict with its southern

neighbor, the government has recently increased electrical rates by 139%, as well as water and telephone rates. The government also placed a two percent "war tax" on all vehicles and has demanded a one-time tax equal to two days salary in order to meet deep budget shortfalls.

Early criticism of the law by government and Protestant officials questioned whether the government had sufficient reserves to pay for the new classes.

Arregui said he has maintained contact with church groups opposed to the law, but none of them have changed their opposition. He said the church is open to dialogue and does not wish to overrun their concerns.

Meanwhile, Ecuador's Minister of Education Fausto Segovia said he is consulting with other countries which have similar laws as he develops regulations for Ecuador.

Segovia said he is most concerned that the congress has not allocated money for the program in the upcoming school year. He said he does not think there will be any budget to implement the law until the 1996 school year.

"There are more than 20,000 schools in the country," he said. "We don't know yet what system of classes or budget we will have."

The minister also expressed concern that attention on the controversy over the new law will deflect work from the larger issue of curriculum reform which is underway.

He said he has been in contact with the church and the government to study and expedite the law. But he pointed to the recent conflict with Peru, controversy over the law and budgetary concerns as reasons for the delay in implementation.

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