

ECUADOR PIECES

by Roger Stoll

Es un país irreal limitado por sí mismo,
partido por una línea imaginaria ...¹

-- from "*Ecuador: La geografía*" by Ecuadorian poet Jorge Enrique Adoum

Introduction: Fragments

Tourists collect fragments of a place: a postcard of a mountain or a monument, a remembered encounter -- little bits of memory gasping for air under a pile of other little bits of memory. It's true even for the "reality tourist," as Global Exchange affectionately calls those of us who sign up for their intensely political tours. I am here with other members of my own solidarity group: Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas (MITF), a cosponsor of this tour.

Ecuador comes to the tourist pre-fragmented, even more than most countries, so a tourist's view might not be the worst you could have. Ecuador is cut in two by the latitude that gives it its name. It's mapped into distinct geographic zones, from glacier-capped Andes, to cloud forests, to the amazon, to the port cities of the Pacific coast. Ethnic borders cut between mestizo, indigenous, african-ecuadorians. Political and cultural boundaries divide coast-dwellers ("costeños") from highlanders ("serranos"). The country itself has had fragments chipped off it in remarkably recent wars, and currently the US-directed war of Colombia against its own people has involved military action and deadly crop fumigation on both sides of the Ecuador-Colombia border. Even Ecuador's political system has been sliced thin across time: eight presidents have come and gone in ten years. Perhaps, for Ecuador, the fragmented, insect-eyed view of a tourist might have a shred of reality in it.

Reality tourists to Ecuador skip the evolutionary wonderland of the Galápagos Islands, as well as most of Ecuador's few mainland islands of carefully preserved, canopied, first growth rain forest. Instead, for example, we met: an indigenous mayor making the revolution in a small Andean town; the on-air voice of a fiercely independent and influential radio station in Quito; the head of the country's Socialist Party, a part of the coalition that put President Rafael Correa into office; a nurse in a health clinic in the Amazon who tries, in her undersupplied, understaffed clinic, to treat some of the most impoverished people in the country. We didn't entirely neglect the nature experience, but it was highlighted by a visit to a massively toxic open oil pit, roiling in a patch of jungle so ravaged by oil prospecting that it's almost unrecognizable -- even by the ravaged people there who still love it and fight to heal it.

I came home carrying these fragments of Ecuador like shards of colored glass, sifting them in my hands, letting them cut my fingers. I'm still trying to piece them together, perhaps into a stained glass window filled, as in a church, with images of suffering and hope. This one would show how Ecuadorian struggles meet ours, from thousands of miles away and across the imperial divide. But for now, here is a collection of fragments: pieces of Ecuador.

¹ "It is an unreal country, self-limited, split by an imaginary line..."

1. A Piece of Chocolate: Kallari²

The sun crisscrosses Ecuador, so there is growing season after growing season. To take just one example, Ecuador grows the biggest roses you've ever seen, for export to the US on Mother's Day and Valentine's Day. The flowers are cultivated in enormous greenhouses, which you can see dotting the hillsides once you go far enough outside Quito. There's a story there, of the young, impoverished, rural women who work the flower plantations, and get doused with the same pesticides that make the roses look much more perfect than their lives will ever be. Nearly three quarters of all flowers sold in the United States are imported, mostly from Colombia and Ecuador. According to the United States National Institute of Health, poisonings of the workers are quite common, typically resulting in nausea, skin eruptions, headache, dizziness and fainting. Our Ecuadorian tour guide and interpreter, Yuri, is familiar with Ecuador's flower industry. "Pesticide poisoning of the plantation workers isn't all that's wrong with it," he explains. "The flower industry destroys indigenous culture; first, by drawing young women from the countryside to work in the plantations, it breaks up the communities. The young men then migrate to the cities to work in construction. Understand that construction in Ecuador is very different than in the north -- it's extremely low-paid work, very low status. And the flower industry is all for export. It's completely dependent on the US market and brings very little wealth into Ecuador. But we won't be visiting the flower plantations this trip."

Ecuador also grows cacao, those reddish, football-shaped pods whose seeds are ground into chocolate. Ecuador's cacao is among the very best in the world. This morning we learn about chocolate grown and manufactured by the Kallari project, and sold, among other places, in a small organic-fair trade-etc restaurant in Quito where we've come for breakfast . . .

The Kallari project encompasses more than fifteen towns or villages, and hundreds of farmers and artisans in Ecuador's Napo province. Kallari, which means "ancient" in Quechua, has increased participants' incomes by 30%. The cacao is grown cooperatively, organically, sustainably, and fair-traded by an indigenous community of some eight hundred families.

One of the directors of the project and a north american advisor explain how the project got N.G.O. money and grants from USAID Once astute reality tourist's ears prick up.

"You mentioned USAID I happen to know that my government doesn't do things for altruistic reasons. So what does it want?"

The north american answers frankly: "USAID has no interest in having the chocolate manufactured in Ecuador, only in having the beans grown for the export market. But the growers are taking the money when they can, then using other funds for their manufacturing project."

"So then how much of the cacao is actually manufactured into chocolate in Ecuador?"

"Only about five or ten percent," she says.

"And the rest?"

Shipped to Switzerland and the EU for processing.

Still, we learn, the families get better prices, they work cooperatively. It's not nothing, I know. I buy some of the delicious chocolate bars to take back home. They are wrapped in rich

² Websites with information about Kallari and other organizations and issues mentioned in this article are listed at the end.

brown paper, beautifully decorated with borders featuring an indigenous design. But it's familiar story: produce and raw material from the global south shipped to the factories of the industrial north for processing into the finished, much more highly valued product. Most of the chocolate in this story, then, is sent to Europe to be turned into brown gold, broken into pieces, and placed on delicate china or melted over raspberry torts, for those who can afford such things.

2. A War Piece: Colombia's Southern Border

We've come to the Quito offices of Oilwatch and Acción Ecológica, which have carefully studied the human and environmental effects of the fairly recently stepped up US/Colombian aerial fumigation of land, crops, people and animals along the Ecuador-Colombia border. Adolfo Maldonado is an activist and physician with Acción Ecológica. He explained the results of the studies. But first we should consider the bases of the policy of fumigation.

The pesticides sprayed from planes are ostensibly for the purpose of eradicating coca. Coca is an ancient, innocuous, mildly medicinal plant, which because it is used in making cocaine for the north American drug market the US government has decreed it must not exist. But this purpose holds only on paper, since it is well-known that the fumigation has vastly increased coca production.

The fumigation is a project of "Plan Colombia," a massive Andean military operation hatched under the Clinton administration, which takes the so-called "war on drugs," and blends it conceptually with the war on the Colombian guerilla -- aka "terrorists," and therefore objects of the so-called "war on terror" as well. Under Plan Colombia, Colombian farmers are continually attacked, terrorized and driven off the land. Some flee across the Ecuador border, where they are attacked again by the same military machine as well as its wholly-owned and directed death squads, presumably because they might grow coca there or feed a hungry guerilla who might also stray across the border. Where the peasants once were, the US/Colombian military stations troops and bases, new outposts in a war decades old. This process may even bring fresh access to the oil deposits that run along the eastern Ecuadorian border with Colombia.

The poison showers began under Plan Colombia in 2000. In the last several years, the Plan has resulted in increased poisonings and death from the fumigation, and increased paramilitary attacks on both sides of the Ecuador-Colombia border. Fumigations cause fever, intestinal bleeding, eye problems including blindness in young children, vomiting and diarrhea. Even US Senator Patrick Leahy was quoted in 2002 in the New York Times saying, "Spraying a toxic chemical over large areas, including where people live and livestock graze, would not be tolerated in our country."

A digression: Colombia's war. It's the longest war in the hemisphere (if the empire itself isn't considered a permanent war). More than half a century ago, a period of civil war in Colombia called "La Violencia" left the country in a near permanent state of war, although the history of violent government repression of the left, workers and peasants reaches even further back. Beneath Colombia's ruling circles is a large peasant and working class, with what is now perhaps the most unequal distribution of wealth in the hemisphere. The guerilla movement that emerged in the early period included both liberal reformist and radical politics, while the largest of the extant guerilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (F.A.R.C.), emerged some time later, in 1964. The smaller National Liberation Army (E.L.N.) came into being a year later. Some of the guerilla organizations accepted a truce with the government in the 1980's. They dropped their rifles, took off their bandanas and ran candidates for political offices in national, regional and local elections. One by one they were hunted down and killed by the government's paramilitary death squads, until the death tally reached the thousands. Of this attempt at an electoral option via the

progressive political formation called the Patriotic Union (U.P.), Colombian-American historian Mario Murillo writes:

“The U.P. was made up of some of the most articulate voices and brilliant political minds of the Colombian left. Included in its ranks were progressive activists and intellectuals from the Communist Party, as well as the traditional parties, local and regional social movements, and the guerrilla movement itself and its support base. Despite winning seats in dozens of local, municipal, and departmental bodies, the traditional oligarchy and the military refused to let them truly participate in political life. In ten years, the UP lost 3,000 of its militants to the dirty war, including two presidential candidates. Threats, assassinations, and general intimidation was the price for trying to establish a legitimate, third political force, lending credence to the ongoing argument of the armed resistance that there are no guarantees for truly independent voices in Colombia.”
(*Colombia and the United States: War, Unrest and Destabilization*, Mario A. Murillo with Jesus Rey Avirama, Seven Stories Press, An Open Media Book, New York, 2004, p. 63.)

It is an important war for the US, which in the past decade or so has spent more money and military aid on Colombia than on anyplace else in the world except Israel and Egypt. But the remaining guerilla, chiefly the FARC and ELN, have held out, more or less controlling at least a third of the country's territory.

Now the US and Colombia's government are waging a war not just in Colombia, but potentially all South America. The Colombian guerilla certainly recognize this. In response to the US's failed coup against Hugo Chavez' government in Venezuela, and the subsequent sabotage of the state oil industry, the FARC issued a public statement of solidarity with the sovereign government of Venezuela, vowing to defend it from across the border should the US or its proxies invade.

Yet even in Colombia it is not just a war against the guerilla, or against coca. It is a war against the popular movements and against labor, just as it has always been. A single example: more labor leaders and organizers are murdered by death squads in Colombia every year than in all the rest of the world combined. Thus the US has the remarkably simple policy toward Colombia of killing everything: people, plants, democracy.

Which brings us back to Ecuador. In addition to turning Colombia into a web of military bases and outposts, the US has placed its largest military base in South America very nearby, in the port city of Manta, Ecuador. The reason it is there is to help execute Plan Colombia. We will finish our reality tour there, in Manta, for a march and demonstration intended to drive out the US military base. Perhaps that will sound a hopeful note after what now follows.

3. Another Piece of War: Children's Souls

Five hundred thousand refugees have crossed the border from Colombia into Ecuador in the last few years. It's the largest human migration in the hemisphere. The physician with Acción Ecológica presents us with charts, numbers, and stories to shiver your spine, about what happened to these refugees back in Colombia and what is happening to them now in Ecuador. Disease and death by poisoning from the fumigations, skin rashes, blindness, poisoning of streams, crops, food. The litany sounds like the biblical plagues. And all this on the Ecuador side of the border. If that were not enough, those who came across to escape their government's war carry memories like mortal wounds, such as when a bus of Colombian peasant families was stopped just so paramilitaries could show them the soccer ball they were playing with. Not a ball, but the severed head of a peasant.

Yet beyond all the statistics and firsthand accounts, absolute and devastating as they are, it is the drawings of the children the physician shows us that hurt most. One drawing has a ghostly outline of a woman, her image having been erased. The very young artist had explained that he erased his mother because, unable to stand the killing, she committed suicide.

After the stepped up fumigation on both sides of the border, the children's drawings display new traumas. Some of the same children who had not long before drawn beautiful, age appropriate drawings of their families, animals, farms, now draw crude lines, faces without mouths, drawings where the only details shown are the planes and helicopters spraying poison over the land and the people. The physician emphasizes that these are not just anecdotal accounts. Psychologists have interviewed and worked with the children, systematically documenting evidence of trauma, from the war in Colombia and the increased fumigation on the border in Ecuador.

Based on earlier statements regarding the aerial fumigations there was some hope the new President, Rafael Correa, an avowed Bolivarian after Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales, might lead an effort by the Ecuadorian government to insist that Colombia stop the spraying along the Ecuador border. But now it seems Correa has since met with and made diplomatic peace with Colombia's President Uribe, so there is less expectation of any change.

4. Pieces Thrown Away: Land, Forests, Peoples

They are called "extractive industries," taking things out of the ground like oil, minerals, metals, stones. It sounds surgical, like removing a wisdom tooth. But it is not like that at all. Mountains are demolished to get the metals, coal and gems inside them. Whole ecosystems, peoples and cultures have been laid waste just to get a little oil out of the ground. Tomorrow we'll visit one of the most notorious examples in the world, in the Ecuadorian Amazon. But tonight Luis Yanza of the Amazon Defense Front comes to the hotel to speak to us about what we will see. He has lived through it all, and now works to make the oil company and the courts clean it up. Luis Yanza:

I was born near Cuenca, in the south, where the forest was very clean. When I was five we moved to the Amazon, Achuar territory. When I was sixteen, I remember that the water there was still clean. In 1977 my father had to move north to work for the oil companies, in Lago Agrio. I remember getting off the bus, this was in August of 1977, and the first thing I stepped on was a thick, stinking patch of oil. I saw there was oil spilled all over the roads. It was a shock coming from my very clean environment in the south.

The roads were full of oil, and whenever it rained -- this is the rain forest, remember -- the oil spread into all the lands of the people, and into the rivers. And they burned pools of oil out in the open. The pools of oil were sources of contamination. People live close to the pools, they drink the water, breath the air there.

To drink, we'd gather rain water in tanks, but when we collected it, it smelled like gas. I learned later this was called "acid rain."

In 1990 Texaco abandoned the country. Then in 1995 they were required to remedy the situation they'd left. But all they did was throw dirt over the oil pools. Now the toxic pools are underground, and they keep contaminating the rivers and streams. When you drill a well for water, that too is contaminated water.

One reality tourist asks: With all the money in the world, is it possible to clean it up?

Luis' answer is complicated, full of implications of battles to come:

Hundreds of lives were lost, whole cultures lost. This is irreparable. But the land can be cleaned so people's health will improve. Some places can be cleaned up, some not. The problem is, the government depends on oil revenues. And there is no way to take oil from the Amazon without harming it -- it's a fragile environment.

a. The Case Against ChevronTexaco

The next day, in the small plane my partner calls a "puddle-hopper," I look over the articles we were given about the oil disaster we are about to visit. Here is what I glean:

About three and a half decades ago Texaco (now ChevronTexaco) began drilling oil in Ecuador's Amazon region. Billions of gallons of toxic waste were dumped into the rain forest, millions of gallons of oil spilled from broken oil pipelines. Thousands of kilometers of road were cut into the jungle, opening the way to the arrival of some 250,000 settlers, overwhelming the indigenous population.

Tens of thousands of indigenous groups became destroyed, dispersed, impoverished. Texaco's first well was drilled in Lago Agrio, site of a village of the Tetete people, who are now extinct. Shushufundi, a Cofán indigenous village, became the site of Texaco's first refinery. The Cofán, who were once many thousands, are now just a couple hundred or so.

The people who survive there have no safe water to drink or wash in. Their animals die from drinking contaminated water. Birth defects, skin rashes, respiratory illnesses, and gastrointestinal disorders are common. The town of San Carlos has one of the highest rates of cancer in Ecuador.

Indigenous groups and other communities have brought suit against ChevronTexaco for dumping 18.5 billion gallons of toxic waste into the rain forest, leaving behind what may be the worst oil-related disaster in the world. The lawsuit, *Aguinda v. ChevronTexaco*, is of worldwide significance, and may set a precedent for people suffering human rights abuses by private companies. The suit asks \$1.5 billion, to be used to clean up the damage. One oil remediation expert estimates the clean up costs will actually be more like \$6 billion, or about a fifth of the profits ChevronTexaco reaped from Ecuador.

The two leading indigenous organizations of Ecuador, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), want a fifteen year moratorium on any new drilling. CONAIE president Luis Macas: "These assaults on the rights of our peoples are declared acts of war. We will resist ecological terrorism and cultural violence when it comes to our territories."

b. A Toxic Tour of the Ecuadorian Amazon: Don't Forget Us

The Amazon Defense Front arranged for this visit here. Our guide on this toxic tour is an indigenous man in his early thirties who lives here. He's an elected leader of the community, an activist and a keen student of the region and its history. We are in northern Lago Agrio, at the site of the discovery of oil in 1967 and the very first oil well. There is a grasshopper pump, and next to it a smaller bright red pump and a cement trough with oily water sitting in it.

When the oil was first drilled there was a celebration here at the well. A patch of forest had been cleared for drilling. People came dressed up. They were dancing, drinking champagne. But

something was happening with the well, and up came a gusher shooting hundreds of meters into the sky, splattering the celebrants with oil. So, notes our guide, this means that the very first oil drilled here was spilled into the forest.

One of our group spots a flame in the distance burning high in the air. Our guide explains that it is gas flaring it out of enormous standing torches you can see for miles. We'll see them up close-up later on.

We have two bird experts with us, and one spots a cloud of swallows or swifts, circling in an updraft, catching insects. It cheers me a bit, knowing that so much can still live here.

Our guide notes (as do the articles I read) that of the five indigenous peoples that used to live in this area one, the Tete, has completely disappeared -- its culture, everything. The Cofán are still here, but now they are only a few hundred. Others are the Huarani, Siona and Secoya.

Now we're seeing these oil pits everywhere. Our guide explains: The company determined how much oil was in a site by digging pits at various distances from one another and measuring how much oil flowed into the pit in a given amount of time. Then they just left the pits.

He pokes a stick in the ground, stirs it up a bit, pulls out the stick, and instantly all the air in the fifty foot clearing around the overgrown pit smells like gas. It's almost overpowering, like sticking your nose into the gas tank of your car.

Our guide explains: From the pools like this one the water sifts through the ground into a stream, then right into a river, then everywhere the river goes. And the entire region is a cancer cluster. His mother died of it: she washed her clothes in the river, bathed in it. Meanwhile ChevronTexaco claims this is all cleaned up.

There is a stream a little way from the pool, but to get to it our guide has to cut us a path with his machete. When we get there the stream looks oily and smells like gas. All the streams around here are like this, he says. Right near here there was one spill of a thousand barrels. It all went through the streams into the Amazon River. And over here, he adds, is where the cows used to graze.

I think of something I read in the articles. That Ecuador's oil exports are mostly consumed in the United States, especially California, where I'm from. So this is where I got all my oil, and here is the mess I left behind.

Our guide takes us to a huge oil pond, maybe one hundred fifty feet in diameter: black oil, in an open pond, mixed with water from the rain. There's no barrier, no membrane lining it, so everything leaches into the ground, into the streams, the rivers. Next to it are these gigantic torches, two or three stories high, with flames shooting out the tops another fifteen feet into the air. He explains: when the oil is in the ground, it's found in a layer: gas on top, then the oil, then water below that. Since the gas here is too expensive to process, they burn it. Some of it, what's called "light gas," they do process, but the rest they flare.

One of our group asks how much of the oil is refined in Ecuador. Our guide answers: There is some refining of oil in Lago Agrio, and at the ports in Esmeralda and Manta. But much of it's refined outside Ecuador.

Question: How does a company get rights to drill in Ecuador? Answer: The way it works is this. The companies get concessions from the government. It doesn't matter whether the proposal

makes sense for Ecuador economically, environmentally, whatever. The government official responsible gets a huge bribe, approves the concession, and quits his job with a pile of cash. In the 1970's there was the oil boom. So credit flowed from the international banks for infrastructure, which meant the national debt boomed. Now Ecuador's external debt is thirteen billion dollars. 25% of the national budget goes to debt repayment. In the end, Ecuador didn't get much out of the oil profits, but the International companies got a lot.

He continues: When the law requires that the companies negotiate with the indigenous peoples in the area of the concession, the company might build a school, or something like that, but it's almost nothing. In one famous case involving Gulf, it was a soccer field -- that's all, just a soccer field, in exchange for fencing off a chunk of the land, drilling and poisoning the land. Once the government took a huge expanse of Guarani land for a concession. It gave the Guarani next to nothing. When the official responsible for it was interviewed, all he said was, "Well, that's how they got Manhattan."

Back in the bus, our tour guide points out that we're passing by the biggest pumping station in the Amazon -- 34,000 barrels a day. He adds: Everything you've seen today. It's everywhere, in every region ChevronTexaco has drilled.

Question: What can we do?

Answer: Don't forget us.

c. The Staff Nurse at the San Carlos Clinic

We visit the health clinic in the town of San Carlos, population about 3,000, to talk to Rosa Moreno, the staff nurse there. She has been there over two decades. Hearing her, what affected me most was that over so long a time she had kept her outrage at the perpetual neglect shown by the government for the systematically impoverished and poisoned people who came to her understaffed, undersupplied clinic. She told us:

Despite all the oil exploitation, we get nothing of that wealth. We've been complaining that this a highly contaminated area. It's where most of the oil wells have been drilled. Everyone knows this now. We have such high levels of cancer, higher than the rest of the country. The cancer rate here is twice what it is in Guayaquil. We try to reach the media and non-governmental organizations to get the word out, and it does get out, but nothing happens. We have no decent water. The river water is harmful even to the animals. Although people know about the high level of contamination of the rivers, they keep using it, because there's little choice for them. Sometimes the water pumps break down, and then they have to go to the river to wash.

At the clinic we seem only to catch the cancer when it's already too late. We see the patients, send them to Quito for treatment, but when they get there they're told it's too late. There are no resources to treat anyone here. There is a case, a seventeen year old with leukemia. She will die. The doctors say that it's the water that's the cause of the cancers. There has been a little remediation of the land, which the oil companies have actually done, but no remediation at all of the water.

We have a supply of anti-inflammatory drugs, enough for children five or under, but no other medications. Any others we need have to be sent from the city. What else can I tell you about the terrible situation here? There is a project to get water from far away, but it won't be done until 2010. Frankly, I am skeptical that it will be done at all, there are always delays, promises, and nothing happens.

We protest, we strike, we meet in the provincial offices of the government, and they sign agreements, promise us supplies and improvements. But they never carry them out. A new government comes in, and then even the agreement is meaningless. For example, the central government knows there's no safe water here. There is a sewer system that's been required by law, but in seven years time it's never been built.

The people here are poor and have little education, that makes organization difficult. When we do organize, we are scolded for being influenced by "leftists."

It's the same in all the other communities in this region. We have only this health center, a couple of horses for transportation, a doctor. The doctor changes every year. They are required to do a year in clinics like this when they graduate medical school, so they come for one year and leave.

We've talked to international organizations, to get the word out, but still nothing happens. If we get any help it will have to be direct help. Anything that goes through the government will never get here. We have everything we need in this country, the resources, but the people can't get any of it because of corruption.

What can you do, you ask? Well, you can go to the Ecuador government and complain, and tell them what you saw. As internationals you may have some influence.

We leave the clinic. Our Ecuadorian tour guide, thinking out loud, tells us that the only solution is for the Correa government to bring something like the Venezuelan "missions" here -- the health missions and literacy missions, done with Cuban expertise and assistance. Take Venezuela's health mission, for example. It's setting up small clinics all over Venezuela. Ten thousand Cuban doctors have come to work in Venezuela.

Many of us nod vigorously in agreement. Several of the group (though not me) from the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas have visited Venezuela recently, not to mention past visits to Cuba and revolutionary Nicaragua. They've seen first hand how rapidly decent social policy can make major gains in health and literacy.

Later, I'm talking to a good friend who's also on the trip. We happen to read some of the same left magazines and tend to think in similar theoretical terms. I'm thinking about what we've just heard, from the nurse, from the toxic tour guide, even from our bus driver, who told us at lunch about the way corruption runs deep and wide throughout the Ecuadorian government. What we heard and saw on the toxic tour and at the clinic were the consequences of corruption specifically related to the extraction of oil for export to the north. So I say to my friend -- or maybe my friend says it to me, or we finish each other's sentences (I don't really remember): "I'm thinking about comprador governments -- you know, any Latin American government economically dominated by the imperial master. It seems to me the essence of such a government *is* its corruption. If it ever began serving its people -- even its bourgeoisie -- in any independent, nationalist manner, it would cease to be a comprador government. Really, it only has to keep up the *appearance* of being a legitimate government. The rest is all corruption."

d. Pieces Not Yet Lost: Serayacu, Intag

In the course of the trip, we hear about two cases of intended corporate plunder that have, for the moment, been forestalled. One case concerns the indigenous Quechua community of 2,000 in Sarayacu, in the southern Amazon region. Through an ingenious mix of self-organization,

litigation, direct action and international pressure, they have held off oil exploitation in their lands. Their struggle has been documented in articles and film.

The second case is in a place called Intag, where we met with community members involved in the effort to block the mining of copper in the gorgeous river valley they call home. Again, like the Serayacu, they have used organizing, direct action, legal challenges to the government mining concession agreements, other litigation, and international pressure to hold off the mining for a decade thus far. They are under threat of violent dispossession of their land, and some of their activists have been falsely charged with crimes related to their resistance. For them, this is a most critical time. Later we'll meet with the mayor of nearby Cotacachi, and he will discuss Intag in some detail, emphasizing that solidarity with this community against the mining concession is one of the most urgent and critical tasks we we can take up upon our return.

5. Pieces of a Mirror: A Tale of Two Mayors

a. Otavalo

The cultural/racial divide between mestizo (mixed spanish/indigenous blood, as most Latin American's identify themselves) and indigenous is sharp, sharper than you can imagine. Mestizo society thinks of the indigenous as dumb, lazy, destined to be poor and subservient. We come to see ourselves the same way.

This is the key message given us by the indigenous sociologist-cum-mayor of Otavalo, Ecuador, Mario Conejo. The mountain town of Otavalo is famous for its huge open-air market, its exquisite weavings and other *artesanía*. We are meeting the mayor in one of the large, richly decorated rooms in the elaborate colonial-era municipal building.

There are not more than a handful of mayors of indigenous origin in Ecuador, so his election and reelection is highly significant. His being mayor means that indigenous people in Otavalo can "hold their heads a little higher." And he says, wittily, that he hopes his being mayor "will help white people overcome their superiority complex."

He doesn't come out of the indigenous political organizations, and in his second election his mestizo and urban support was higher than his indigenous and rural support. He takes pride in Otavalo having, in his words, "the best indigenous-mestizo relations in Ecuador."

As for economic and social policy, he says that during his tenure the city has made significant improvements in basic sanitary infrastructure. But in health, education -- "those, unfortunately, are the province of the central government" and there's little he can do. Although he identifies himself as "of the left," he admits that in order to have a municipal budget for public works projects, he has "had to do some things that are very right-wing." For example, his administration has eliminated some subsidized services, raised everyone's taxes 300%, and raised water rates one thousand percent. "We have had to tighten our belts," he reports regretfully.

One thing he believes he can do is to change the popular view of government. He explains that Ecuadorian society views politicians as criminals. He intends to make his administration an example of clean government, free of corruption.

As we leave the meeting I find myself jumping to conclusions I know I have no right to. What can I possibly know of Ecuadorian politics? Certainly not enough to conclude that this mayor is essentially a neoliberal politician, one who talks left and governs right, something like a municipal version of Brazil's president, Lula da Silva.

b. Cotacachi

Having just one meeting with an actual mayor in Ecuador would have been an amazing thing for a tour group like ours. But no, our nearly superhuman guide has arranged for us to meet not one but *two* mayors. Our second mayor, Auqui Tituaña, also indigenous, is the mayor of Cotacachi, a town a bit north of Otavalo.

We meet the mayor in an upstairs room in back of the the town's cultural museum. On one wall is a picture of the mayor shaking hands with Fidel Castro; on another is the Cuban flag. I'm thinking this will be a different sort of mayor than the last one.

The mayor understands that we are in Ecuador in part to attend the "No Bases" conference in Quito, which inaugurates an international network to oppose foreign bases everywhere in the world. We're also here to attend the protest in Manta in opposition the US military base there. "We will finish with the Manta base," he says, "with your help."

The mayor meets with us at length. Here is what we learn.

Since 1996 when the mayor came into office, his administration has been building what is called "participatory democracy," and an alternative local development model. He is now in his third four-year term.

The municipality happens to be 60% indigenous. Indigenous people only gained the right to vote in Ecuador in 1979. In 1986 a national indigenous movement took shape. In 1990 there was an indigenous uprising. And in 1996 the first indigenous candidates appeared, winning twelve mayoralties and six congressional seats. In the year 2000, indigenous candidates won twenty-seven mayoralties and eleven congressional seats (out of a total of one hundred in Ecuador's unicameral legislature). The name of the indigenous political party is Pachakutik. Its flag is the rainbow flag.

Through nine years of national political crises -- removal of presidents, and so on -- Cotacachi has had just one mayor. Other municipalities emphasize urban infrastructure in their programs and expenditures. Cotacachi takes care of that, but also works for development of culture, sustainable agriculture, people's health and human needs.

His administration is a pioneer in this mode of participatory democracy. With his administration Cotacachi became the first municipality to sue the central government over its administration of health. The community is now managing public health. Integrating indigenous and standard medicine, emphasizing prevention and promotion of good health, the municipality has reduced infant and maternal mortality. In 2004 and 2005 Cotacachi achieved a level of infant and maternal mortality better than Cuba's.

There are ten Cuban doctors working here. Health workers are trained to avoid racism and bias against the poor in the delivery of services. Two weeks ago some US and Canadian doctors finished a fifteen day mission here. They did seventy-nine surgeries, working in teams with Cuban doctors. All collaborated beautifully, showing it can be done.

Cotacachi has an eye surgery program with Venezuela for cataracts. The program also gives out glasses for free.

In 2005, with two advisors from the Cuban Ministry of Education, Cotacachi began its literacy program. In one year, illiteracy dropped to under four percent. In 2006, UNESCO

declared Cotacachi free of illiteracy. There are one hundred and twenty literacy promoters. Seventy percent are women. As part of the program the promoters are also able to study English and computers. The municipality has been able to spread literacy programs to seventy municipalities.

Regarding oil exploitation, it has been shown that it has not benefitted Ecuador. Just the opposite: it increases poverty.

Regarding the conflict with the mining company in Intag. It has been a ten year struggle, first a Japanese company had the concession, then an English company, then a Chilean one, and now it's a Canadian company. The government concession violates Article 89 of the Ecuadorian Constitution, requiring consultation with the community. The consultation never happened, therefore the concession is illegal and the Cotacachi government is asking the government to terminate that concession. Under the concession the Ecuadorian government gets nothing at all of the profits. The only thing the government will get out of it will be a little bit of tax money. So aside from the damage to the community and the environment, it's robbery. Among the Canadian company's shareholders are former US military. Some people suspect the operation has military purposes, and of course the concession is connected with government corruption.

As to all of Ecuador's mining concessions for copper, gold and molybdenum, Cotacachi wants a mining moratorium, and the Constitution to be changed so that a popular consultation decides whether mining should happen. The municipality asks that the forests be cared for, that agriculture be sustainable, that tourism be ecological -- a holistic model of development.

Question (from one of our group): How did you raise the money for your health and literacy programs?

Answer: The models we've used have allowed us to attract new funds. In the first four years, the state gave us about a million dollars. With local participation and volunteers, another million was added in kind. We also got funds from organizations in the EU, Japan and the United States, totaling three million.

Question: How did the collaboration with Cuba begin?

Answer: I had had a scholarship to study there. I studied economics, my wife studied medicine. So we have some connections there already. At first when we asked to study there we were told to go through the Communist or Socialist parties. But we didn't belong to those parties and so they were closed to us. So we talked directly to Cuban leaders, and they agreed to help us. Now there are two hundred and fifty professionals from here who have studied in Cuba, and another one hundred studying there now. For Cuba, our contribution for Cuba is simply that we can show the world democracy from a different perspective.

Question: What was the town like before you became mayor?

Answer: There was a divide between the authorities and the community. An example is that the authorities would typically force the indigenous to perform tasks such as cleaning the municipality. The government was under heavy influence from the churches and the hacienda owners.

Question: Three presidents have been kicked out, with the help of the indigenous movements. What tasks do you have to accomplish to get your interests represented in the central government?

Answer: We want all the municipalities to be treated the same. We want nothing special for the indigenous population. But in this municipality, we would like the state to bring everyone up to better health and education levels.

Question: Does the education program include Marxism?

Answer: Obviously I learned some theory in Cuba. But Marxism doesn't apply well in Latin America. I don't favor dogmatic application of Marxism in Cotacachi, or the Fidel/Marti ideas directly. Each country has its own reality. The fact that our population is forty percent indigenous forces us to come up with new proposals. The Cotacachi model has a strong connection with indigenous economic models, plus Cuban ideas. This creates our own model.

Question: If the municipality had a mining company, would it mine? Or is mining too environmentally destructive?

Answer: The answer must come from the communities and the authorities. We would offer it for consultation with the people. But we have so many other riches, handicrafts, agriculture, tourism -- all alternatives to mining. The current Minister of Energy has a revolutionary proposal: to ask Al Gore to help find a business owner to buy the oil that's in the ground in Ecuador, and *not* drill it. I would like this for the mines as well.

Question: Participatory democracy -- how does it work?

Answer: We've created permanent spaces for dialogue, in health, literacy, education, environment, crafts, tourism. These are part of a council with the municipality. You may know of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, Brazil They put thirty percent of the budget into the participatory system. Cordoba Spain has it too, for twenty percent of the budget. Here in Cotacachi, one hundred percent of the budget is decided this way. Each year there are about one hundred and twenty meetings involving about eighteen thousand people.

(By this time a number of us have tears in our eyes. Those who don't, will get have them by the end of the session, when the mayor tells us a folk tale about a hummingbird.)

Question: There is a new government, a new president, Rafael Correa. Does it give you any hope?

Answer: No, I don't have much hope that this government will be much different. But governments come and go, while the indigenous movements are on a different track. For one thing, Correa has a very young political party structure, with no national structure at all. There are a lot of businessmen in his group, and there are contradictions between his speeches and the facts. He is a politician. He asked me to be his vice presidential candidate but I refused. I just hope he does a good job. Instability won't help Ecuador. In ten years we've had nine governments. So, let's give him some time.

Question: When you have questions in your mind, who do you consult with?

Answer: The gods. That's g-o-d-s. Actually, I just listen a lot. We have a structure that allows us to share ideas.

Question: We saw the clinic in San Carlos...

Answer: They can visit us. We have many visitors from all over the world.

Question: What do you think of the Chavez government in Venezuela?

Answer: We had the Venezuelan eye project. We'll also be signing new agreements for future projects. If you compare it with former governments in Venezuela, Chavez is doing work directed toward the marginalized people. He has his own style. But between the styles of Chavez and Fidel, I prefer Fidel.

Question: What is it we should do?

Answer: Two things. 1) We need your help on the mining issue (in Intag). 2) Tell the world about our municipal government model.

(The mayor concludes the meeting with a folk tale.)

There is an indigenous legend about a hummingbird. It goes like this. There is a big fire in the forest. The tiger, the bear, all of them are running away. The hummingbird asks them where they are going. They say, "Don't you see there's a fire? We have to flee." But the hummingbird answers, "No. We have to do something to put out the fire." The hummingbird looks toward the fire. "I'm going to do my part," he says to the other animals and flies back to the fire, stopping to pick up a drop of water with the tip of his beak.

6. Political Pieces: People Talking Politics

a. Javier

We are back in Quito for a three day conference, called "No Bases," bringing together activists from all over the world opposing all foreign military bases in their countries. From this perspective, it's remarkable (even if obvious) that virtually every foreign military base in the world is a US one. More on the conference later.

Javier, a young political science student in Quito who has been helping with the tour, has agreed to give us a talk, in English, on Ecuadorian politics and the role of the social movements. It turns out to be one of the most enlightening sessions of the trip. On top of that, he manages to do it while the group is having lunch at a restaurant. This means that now and then he has to interrupt his trenchant observations on Ecuadorian politics to interpret for us and the waiters, making sure this one gets the chicken, that one the tamale, etc.

Latin America is moving toward a new political system, but not necessarily socialism. Of course, there are the new left-leaning presidents, Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, etc. But why are they there?

Electoral politics is no longer the only way of participating in politics. We've seen the social movements determining these elections in a new way, the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, the Zapatistas in Mexico, and so on. In the case of Ecuador, the question is, why have three presidents been overthrown in the last nine years? And why has Correa been elected?

I'll break my talk up into three sections, covering the political parties, the social movements, and the state itself.

The Political Parties

The political parties do not exist uniformly throughout the country. There is a sharp divide between the coast and the sierra. The Amazon region, which is weak, is largely ignored. The traditional party of the right is strong at the coast; the traditional social democratic party, in the sierra. These two parties form blocks with others.

In the 1930's, the socialist and communist parties emerged. But they've had to struggle to gain the minimum 5% required for electoral participation. The party that is now called the Socialist Party is actually the result of a merger between the Socialist and Communist parties of the past.

Understand that in Latin America the relationship between Political Parties and the population is very different than in the US or the EU. The parties essentially engage in vote-buying. You don't have the conditions for an ideal democracy here, since so many have no education, health care, food, etc. So they are at a great disadvantage as voters. For democracy you need a populace with access to information, but for so many that simply doesn't exist -- and not just among the uneducated. For example, the one hundred person national congress is elected by population and region. So here in Quito I had to vote for fourteen congressional representatives. I voted for five whom I knew something about, but I didn't know anything about the rest.

So, instead of informed voting on policies or ideology, you get a sort of populism. For instance, parties pay people money to put political posters on their houses. Or the parties or candidates may go to some neglected town, build a bridge or a school or something, put up their posters and slogans there, and people will vote for them because they only know what the party is doing in the town itself, not about its politics. For example, Gustavo Noboa, the candidate Rafael Correa defeated, used to hand out campaign tee shirts with ten dollar bills stuffed inside them. To a poor person, that's a lot of money for a vote.

The last three elected presidents can be described as populists in this way. And all three were overthrown. In 2001, Mahuad was overthrown by the indigenous movements and the middle layers of the army. Gutierrez, who had participated in the overthrow, became president in 2002. In 2005, Gutierrez was overthrown. Correa had participated in this overthrow, and served briefly as Minister of Finance in the interim government that followed. Then Correa formed a new party and a year later won election.

The Social Movements

In the 50's and 60's the social movements were really just branches of the political parties. For example, the Communist Party was strong in the central university, and participated in strikes. In fact, the CP and the Socialist Party became strong because of that participation. In the rural areas, in the 19th and into the 20th centuries the situation was more or less feudal. The indigenous and peasants were tied to the haciendas -- plantations. A single landlord might employ an entire village. The Constitution did not even recognize the people as citizens.

In the 1960's land reform began, so peasants and the indigenous began to organize themselves, initially just for immediate practical purposes, such as bringing their goods to markets. But this is the beginning, in the 60's and 70's, of true social movements in the rural areas. Just an aside -- also in the 60's and 70's we see unions cutting their links with the parties and beginning to act independently. Back to the rural picture. The indigenous movement is now the largest in Ecuador. Around 1989 the movement came into formal existence, and around 1996 the indigenous political party was formed.

To go back for a bit, in the 60's and 70's there began to be something of a welfare state in Ecuador -- efforts to bring education and health services to the rural areas. From 1972 through 1978 there was a military dictatorship which was considered to be a "welfare state" government. Now around 1982, neoliberal policies began to be applied in Ecuador. In the rural areas this meant worsening conditions, so indigenous activism begins. In the urban areas, conditions for labor worsen with the introduction of "flexible" working conditions, subcontracting, more hourly work, etc. The unions become weaker. Also in the 1980's, college students begin to organize politically.

In the 90's, the indigenous begin to demonstrate, until in 1994, 1996 and 1997 there are what can be called "uprisings" by the indigenous movements. At the same time, women's and environmental movements emerge. Most of the movements are related in some way to Marxist ideology. Around this time, the mid-90's, we can say that the indigenous movement is strong as a movement but not as a party. Some of the other parties have allied with the indigenous party, which is important partly because cohesion in the indigenous movement is very strong. For example, president Gutierrez was in a coalition with the indigenous party, but after six months into Gutierrez' term, tensions with the indigenous party grew, and it dropped out of the government, which left the government very weak. Gutierrez, by the way, came out of the military and that was his base. Another example is Correa, who linked with the indigenous organizations. In short, the indigenous formations and the party have great weight in determining electoral outcomes.

The State and Rafael Correa

Ecuador has a presidential system with a unicameral legislature and a Supreme Court. There are twenty-two provinces. The Congress has one hundred representatives, which are elected based on population numbers. So, as I mentioned, this province has fourteen representatives.

There are great tensions between the president and Congress. And since there is a way the president can put through laws without much input from Congress, you can say that the Ecuadorian president is stronger than the president in some other Latin American countries. Here is an example of the division between the president and the legislature. The two major parties last held the presidency from 1984 through 1988 (the conservative Social Christian Party) and from 1988 through 1992 (the liberal Social Democratic Party). Yet the majority of the Congress belong to these two parties. Correa's party is a new formation and doesn't have a single member in Congress.

So who is Rafael Correa? Correa was part of the social movements that overthrew Gutierrez, and served briefly in Palacio's interim government. While he was there, Correa made it clear through his efforts that he was a true leftist. The political strength he has now rests on those three months he was in office and attempted to do things that would benefit the masses. He eventually began building a network and formed *Alianza País* as his political party. It doesn't include the indigenous party, but does include the Socialist Party.

The majority of Ecuador's working class supports Correa. But let's look at who doesn't support him. First, the traditional left and the right wing. The Social Democratic Party is equivocal, and some of the social movements criticize Correa, especially his plan for a Constitutional Assembly.

b. Radio La Luna

In 2005, as Javier mentioned, the president was overthrown. We learn a bit of how that happened when we visit Quito's ten-year-old, independent, left, countercultural radio station, reminiscent of our own Pacifica stations. The on-air host, Paco Velasquez, gives an account of the role Radio La Luna played in the April 2005 overthrow of president Gutierrez.

By 2005 Gutierrez had shown his betrayal of the people and the indigenous movements with whom he had allied. One day there were significant demonstrations, though not enormous, in Quito, demonstrations Gutierrez had treated with contempt. So a listener calls in to the station explaining that a lot of people like her would have liked to have been at the demonstration but had to work. She suggests that at 9:00 pm that night, everyone go outside in their neighborhoods and begin banging pots and pans. And she asks Radio La Luna to remind people and to do a countdown as the hour approaches.

Well, from 9 pm until one o'clock in the morning people banged their pots and pans. It was a sound revolution. Then there was another planned for the next night, except this time it was exploding balloons, so at 9:00 everyone popped balloons. And the next day, toilet papering all around the city. Everyday there were protests of some kind planned by the people, and Radio La Luna was asked to announce them, so we did. The police eventually came out to repress the protests.

People made these protests in their own neighborhoods instead of in front of Congress. At one point a group of vigilantes came to the radio station with torches intending to burn it down. But ten thousand people came to protect the station. They captured one of the guys with torches and brought him into the station. So I interviewed him on the air. He said that he was working for the government, and that he and the others had come bringing liquor to give to poor people to make them drunk, and with gasoline and torches in order to burn the station.

Then there was a united, mass protest at 5:00 pm downtown. About 250,000 marched. And that night the repression began. The tear gas caused one Chilean photographer who had been associated with the social movements to die of asphyxiation. The government paid people to come to Quito and start fights with the protesters. Eventually the police used up their supply of tear gas and began using bullets. With that, the Chief of Police resigned in protest.

Gutierrez fled in a military helicopter. When people knew he would flee they went to the commercial airport to look for him. They just went in, and even checked the planes, trying to keep him from leaving. But he was able to sneak out in a military helicopter.

This was the work of the people. There wasn't one politician on the streets.

c. The Socialist Party

Victor Granda is the head of Ecuador's Socialist Party, part of Alianza País, which brought Correa to the presidency. Our amazingly connected tour guide Yuri manages to get us a meeting with him.

The party was founded in 1926, making it one of the oldest. We've had representatives in Congress, but never the presidency. In 1944 or 1945 we came close to power during an uprising, and during that year one of our party was president of the Assembly. But in later years the influence of the party declined. In the 60's we called for Cuban-style revolution. There was a guerilla group then, and the head of our party was jailed for many years.

In the 1980's various branches grew out of the party. At that time we considered that

conditions were not right for armed struggle. We merged various political groups into a broad front, which is the party we are today. In 1990 the president of the Congress was a member of this front. In the past few years we've tried to ally with other parties. In the last election we allied with Alianza País, through which President Correa was elected by a large margin. Correa is a progressive, charismatic leader who's proposed deep economic reform.

We are opposed to the traditional structure of government, so we did not run candidates for Congress. Our purpose was to win the presidency and then propose a Constitutional Assembly. The traditional parties, on the other hand, oppose the Constitutional Assembly because they may lose their privileges.

We are opposed to Plan Colombia, whose purpose is to create a hammer (Colombia) and an anvil (Ecuador) to crush the FARC. Colombia now has free access to Ecuadorian airspace. From Manta, the US has sunk ships, even ships carrying immigrants. The Manta base is part of Plan Colombia. The Socialist Party wants the base to be gone immediately. And we want an investigation of the base and its violations of law.

There is a possible connection here with the recent helicopter crash and death of the Minister of Defense. Correa appointed Guadalupe de la Riva as Minister of Defense. This made the military nervous. A few days after she took office she began receiving threats. She had begun an investigation into corruption in the military. Unfortunately she was convinced to take part in a very risky military exercise in a helicopter on January 24, 2007. Her daughter was with her and they were both killed in a nighttime crash. The circumstances surrounding the crash are extremely suspicious. For example, US military personnel were present at the site of the accident within minutes, and the records of the accident that night vanished. Some have taken the accident as a warning to the Correa government not to close the base at Manta.

Initially there was some hope the base could be closed immediately, but unfortunately Correa accepted the two year time period and has promised simply not to renew the lease when it comes up in 2009.

In Colombia it is clear that the US runs the show. The case of Simon Trinidad clearly shows that. The Socialist Party has no direct relations with the FARC or the ELN, although at the Sao Paulo forum we were able to talk to some people from those organizations. We are not in agreement with certain actions they have taken, such as kidnappings and their narcotics links. On the other hand we are not the judges of matters in their country. We know that the reports about them in the U.S. and Colombia media are false.

The Socialist Party has good relations with the indigenous movement and its formations. Many leaders from the Socialist Party have become leaders in CONAIE. We have good relations with CONAIE, FENOCIN, and the evangelical indigenous organizations. We also have strong relations with unions. Many union leaders are members of the Socialist Party. And we have university professors in the party as well.

As for the future, there are only about nine Congressional supporters of Correa. And it is of course possible to control the country through the Congress, without having the presidency.

d. The Human Rights Commission

Early in the tour we met with staff attorneys and researchers from the human rights commission in Quito. A few points we learned from that meeting seem particularly relevant to the political history given us by Javier, Victor Granda and Paco Velasquez.

The period of 1984 through 1988 may have been the worst period of human rights violations by the government, including extra-judicial killings, routine violations of civil rights, massacre. Under the Cordero government of the time, both the leaders of the police and armed forces were graduates of the notorious School of the Americas in Georgia, US, famous for training the leaders of military and paramilitary death squads in Central America and elsewhere.

In the 1990's, under the so-called "war on drugs," the government began filling the jails with smalltime drug users or drug runners. This was done under United States pressure, and involved detentions without trial, and torture.

In Guayaquil in 1996, 1500 troops with helicopters, boats and so forth closed four city blocks and committed extra-judicial killings, among other violations.

e. Alex

The bus driver Alex is with us at one of our lunch tables, so we ask for his take on the Ecuadorian politics, the general situation in Ecuador, what he expects of the Correa government, and what he thinks of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Outside the towns, there are no services, no water, no electricity, etc. The average salary here is about \$250, but a minimal living wage is \$360, so people work two jobs if they can. Our politicians are thieves, really. What Ecuador needs most is first to fight corruption. We need a system that doesn't pardon thieves.

Hugo Chavez funded Correa's campaign, so now we say that our oil is in Venezuela. But Correa hasn't yet had a chance to mess up. Some people look on him as a savior, but others are skeptical.

Chavez in Venezuela is doing what Fidel did, concentrating economic power in the central government through the control of resources. In Venezuela Chavez is making things better for the people. It's different than here. In Ecuador the government gets only a small percent of the profits from the oil they sell. But in Venezuela, they can get the price they want and choose to sell or not sell. So Venezuela is able to fund the social programs.

f. Juan Carlos

Waiting at the mini-airport for the flight back to Quito from the Amazon, I strike up a conversation with Juan Carlos, who lives in Quito and works in the Amazon in the oil industry at the administrative level. A corporate businessman, I suppose we'd call him. A nice guy, and a political conservative. As I listen to him, I make no secret of my disagreements, commenting on the disastrous effects of free trade agreements in Latin America, the fact that poverty has greatly increased in his country in the last fifteen years due to neoliberal policies and devaluation, about the devastation of the Amazon caused by the oil industry, about the tragic effects of the flower industry on the plantation workers, about how despite all this export activity in oil and flowers, Ecuador gets very little revenue out of it. Here's what he says.

I didn't vote for Correa, I'm afraid of what he might do. He's talked about getting rid of dollarization, although it probably won't happen. Even Correa said he thought it would cause a civil war if he did. In the last ten years, including the period of dollarization, Ecuador has gotten a lot better. Instead of old, small cars driving around Quito, you see newer model and larger cars. My friends are all doing better, buying houses.

In Ecuador, unlike the US, everyone has a maid. Wages are about \$120 a month. That's very bad, of course, but it's better than it was before dollarization.

I work for a very small oil company. It's owned by a Brazilian, though all the employees are Ecuadorian like me. We drill very carefully, slant drilling, so we only have to go into the jungle in one place instead of five. And we put lots of money into the local communities -- fifty times the amount the large oil companies spend. And I'm glad we do that. The problem is that in the last ten years so many people have moved into the jungle; they all want us to provide schools and housing and health care. And they aren't indigenous, they are people just like you and me. It used to be just the indigenous we had to worry about.

Ecuador needs more free trade. Free trade is good for Ecuador. It's how we get our products to the European and US markets. A Harvard study looked at Ecuador's economic strengths and found that, actually, oil wasn't even high on the list. The top strengths were tourism and agriculture. Take the flower industry, this mother's day exports are expected to increase 30% -- 30%! And we've got the Galápagos.

Actually, people have mixed feelings about the base in Manta. Some don't want to kick it out because they don't want to antagonize the US, our biggest trading partner. Also, the local people don't want to get rid of it because their businesses make money from it. Personally, I'm in favor of getting rid of the base. There are plans to build a major new port there, which will be the largest port in Ecuador. If the base is gone, the construction will take advantage of all the landscaping that's already done. The port will connect with a transportation route across Ecuador. So there are a lot of large business interests that support getting rid of the Manta base.

7. Pieces of Resistance: One No, Many Yeses

One No, many Yeses.

-- Zapatista saying

a. The No Bases Conference

The "No-bases" conference is meant to create a global network of people fighting the construction, placement and expansion of foreign military bases everywhere in the world. That is the big picture, and within it are smaller pictures. For example, in confronting US bases around the Pacific, activists from Okinawa, Hawaii, Guam, the Phillipines, South Korea and Australia held a joint panel discussing their struggles, and the way they are linked by US strategic plans and by the type of environmental and social devastation the bases bring to their communities.

Colombia is also a big part of the conference, since the US seems to be turning as much of the Colombian countryside as it can into military bases and encampments, while devastating the people there. The base at Manta, in part the reason this conference is being held in Ecuador, is of course a piece of Plan Colombia, as Victor Granda had just reminded us. The conference was held three days at the Catholic University in Quito, one day in Manta.

I attended a presentation by a young activist and scholar from Guam named Julian Aguon. He explained how the indigenous Chamoru people of Guam were devastated by the military occupation and destruction of the island, and how it is an effort even to keep Chamoru culture and language alive. I bought his collection of essays and read it on the dozen-hour long bus ride from Quito to Manta. (*The Fire This Time: Essays on Life Under U.S. Occupation*, Julian Aguayo, blue

ocean press, Tokyo, 2006.)

Aguon is a powerful, eloquent writer, who addresses the military occupation suffered by Okinawans, the people of the Phillipines, and others of the Pacific as well as his homeland of Guam. One essay titled “Salt to the Soul Wound” lambasts the Guam Public School System’s promotion of “a new curriculum designed to educate Chamoru children about US military history, culture and society,” in order to give Chamoru children a greater appreciation of the US military. Aguon writes:

“The curriculum -- if we can call it by its name -- is education for indoctrination. Education for the last assimilation. It means only to continue a cycle of insidious trauma that has haunted us since the start of US occupation in 1898. *The geographical significance of their home*. Now that is something our children should learn well. So they are not later lured into the lie that they matter.”

“The first colonial lash came at the end of the Spanish-American War, which severed Guam from her natural archipelago. The 1898 Treaty of Paris broke the integrity of the Mariana Islands, splitting the Chamorus of Guam from the Chamorus of the Northern Marianas. Under the treaty, the US got Guam and Germany got the territory now known as the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.”

“After years of trying to eradicate the Chamoru language via a Speak English Only rule, the naval government hit the heart when, in 1919, an executive order forced Chamoru women to change their last names to that of their husbands upon marriage, along with their children’s. The law also named the husband as head of the household, thereby trampling our traditional family structure, which was markedly matrilineal. Its patriarchy has been one of the more potent US poisons.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 99-100)

The human, environmental and cultural destruction Aguon describes in Guam, a very small place, echoes and anticipates the destruction wrought by US global militarism, whether in the Pacific, the Middle East or elsewhere. It’s what the No Bases conference is really about. For in some sense, like the Chamoru of Guam, nearly everyone in the world belongs to a people and culture at risk of annihilation.

b. Oswaldo Guayasamín

Not scheduled on our tour is the museum that houses the work of the great twentieth century Ecuadorian painter Oswaldo Guayasamín. So I skip a day of the conference to go there. After coffee and rolls at the hotel, the rest of the group leaves for the conference at Catholic University, while I walk a few blocks to take the Ecovía, one of Quito’s electric bus routes, to the north part of Quito. After I get off the bus, I have to climb several steep blocks to the museum, which overlooks Quito in a spectacular view that Guayasamín couldn’t paint enough of: Quito sitting in the hollow of a steep bowl of black mountains, strands of houses reaching like fingers up the sides of the bowl. When the bowl is capped by dark clouds, its like nothing I’ve ever seen and has an emotional effect on me I can’t describe. It’s not ominous, but it’s dark. It’s spectacular and grand, but not exuberant or even breathtaking. It’s a little scary, but not at all terrifying or vertiginous. I really can’t describe it.

Guayasamín liked to paint human suffering, but little of his work displays graphic violence or death. The style is twentieth century, and looks to me influenced by cubism and African and pre-colombian art, sometimes evoking Picasso and Diego Rivera. His best known work includes many paintings of faces and hands that cannot be mistaken for any other artist’s. His faces are often a

pair of linked almond eyes against a flat disk, flaring vertical lines for a nose and flat circles for nostrils. It's misleading to describe them that way, because they are filled with so much emotion that it's difficult to tear your eyes away. There are faces and more faces, in fantastic, striking, but somehow perfect colors. Faces of mothers with children, lovers' faces, grieving faces, angry faces. As many as there were, I felt I could look at them endlessly.

One large painting is called "The Death of Che," a face with tears coming from one eye. At first it seemed to me to be Che's death mask from the famous photo of his body lying on a table, but perhaps it is just an image of grief for his death.

The hands Guayasamín paints have nearly as much emotional power as the faces. The articulations of the fingers are so exaggerated that the joints seem almost to float independently in space. I think of the haunting hands in Egon Schiele's self-portraits, but that's not quite it. One famous series of Guayasamín hands consists of fourteen paintings, each of a face and hands, sometimes just the hands. Grey, dark blue and black predominate. The hands are shaped in gestures: hands of greed, begging hands, grieving hands, praying hands, bloody hands of protest.

The literature at the museum tells us Guayasamín decided early in life to paint human suffering as an act of protest against oppression and injustice. He died in 1999.

c. March on the Base at Manta

Over a thousand people from at least forty countries marched three or four miles from the downtown port of Manta out to the military base. Oddly, unlike every march I've been to in the US, this one starts precisely on time. So much for Latin American stereotypes.

It's sunny and warm. It's Ecuador's sun, which seems to spread wider and shine deeper than the sun back home. The first part of the march is along the water, so frigate birds circle overhead. They are fantastic, angular birds that look slightly evil. I'm told they specialize in piracy for their sustenance.

We reach the base. The visible entrance is all Ecuadorian military, with two statues representing the Ecuadorian air force and army. Someone gets close to them and puts stickers on them. They are these little blue 4" by 5" stickers that say "NO BASES," a naturally bilingual phrase. One protester manages to stick one right over the crotch of the army statue.

There is press there, TV cameras, photographers. Lots of chanting, but in another stunning difference from marches back home: no speeches.

This march is not only the end but the culmination of this reality tour. It's an expression of international solidarity against a common, global foe. In that sense it expresses nearly everything this and all "reality tours" are really about.

I first read about the "No Bases" conference not long before I came to Ecuador, and until then I'd never thought about there being such a movement, or the significance of US bases encircling the world. A friend in the tour group said it hadn't occurred to him either, but then at the conference it dawned on him that it made perfect sense. "After all," he said, "it's how the empire enforces its rule."

I try to think hard about the plain fact that I am here in Ecuador, the place they call "the middle of the world." I look up at what I figure must also be "the middle of the sky." I think of the biblical metaphor, "the yoke of oppression," and of it binding and choking the peoples of the

world, here, at earth's middle latitude. Anger wells up in me, and at that moment I feel the ground so solidly under me that it is as if I myself have become a piece of Ecuador.

For further information on the people, movements and issues discussed in this article:

Acción Ecológica

<http://www.accionecologica.org>

Amazon Defense Front/Frente de Defensa de la Amazonia (FDA)

<http://www.ecuanex.net.ec/fda>

Amazon Watch

<http://www.amazonwatch.org>

Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (CONFENIAE)

<http://www.ecuanex.net.ec/confeniae>

Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador (CONAIE)

<http://www.conaie.org>

Defensa y Conservación de Intag (DECOIN)

(An organization working to defend Intag from unwanted development and copper mining.)

<http://www.decoin.org.ec>

Global Exchange (GX)

<http://www.globalexchange.org>

Kallari Fair Trade Cooperative

<http://www.kallari.com>

Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas (MITF)

<http://www.mitfamericas.org>

No Bases Network

<http://www.no-bases.net>

Oilwatch

<http://www.oilwatch.org>

Sarayaku Campaign

<http://www.sarayaku.com>

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