



U.S. Army (Stuart J. Gubler)

Santiago River (foreground) and Yaupi River on Ecuador-Peru border.

# Operation Safe Border: The Ecuador-Peru Crisis

By GLENN R. WEIDNER

In January 1995, the hemisphere was shocked by an outbreak of fighting between Ecuador and Peru over a long-festering border dispute. During a six-week period, more than 100,000 men were mobilized, fleets were deployed, air forces capable of striking the respective capitals of each protagonist were repositioned, and both sides suffered as many as 300 casualties in fierce combat in the upper Cenepa Valley.

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# Report Documentation Page

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Coming in the wake of the December 1994 hemispheric Miami summit, the conflict posed a serious threat to regional stability. Rapid, effective responses by guarantors of the 1942 Protocol of Rio de Janeiro—Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the United States—helped to stop hostilities and created conditions for negotiating a diplomatic solution to a complex and highly emotional problem of long standing.

The Military Observer Mission, Ecuador/Peru (MOMEPE) may become an historic example of effective multinational peacekeeping. This operation was successful because of unprecedented cooperation between political and military representatives of the guarantors and the strong desire of the belligerents to end the hostilities quickly.

The roots of the conflict lie in a dispute between the two countries over the delimitation and demarcation of the border along an isolated stretch of jungle highlands characterized by extremely difficult terrain and continuous cloud cover.<sup>1</sup> Although the dispute extends back to the colonial period, the consequences of a war between these countries in 1941 was particularly relevant to the observer mission. In that year, Peru invaded southern Ecuador and forced a settlement under the 1942 Rio Protocol.

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That agreement committed both parties to a cessation of hostilities and defined a common border based on the limited geophysical data which existed at that time.

Unfortunately, the demarcation was never completed because of a geophysical anomaly that was discovered in the upper Cenepa Valley in 1946. Since 1960, Ecuador has insisted that the protocol is not executable in that area and is suggesting a claim to extensive territory in the Amazon Basin. Peru, on the other hand, asserted that the protocol is valid and has considered the disputed territory to be sovereign. As a result, numerous small-scale clashes have erupted in the area over



A corner of disputed territory.

U.S. Army (Douglas Ide)

the past fifty years, usually near the January anniversary of the signing of the protocol.

### Border War

In December 1994, Peruvian intelligence confirmed that the Ecuadoreans had established base camps in the disputed area.<sup>2</sup> Combat operations began with Peruvian air and ground attacks in the vicinity of the Cenepa and at the confluence of the Santiago and Yaupi Rivers. Over six weeks, both sides managed to introduce more than 5,000 troops in a 70-square kilometer area of extremely dense

jungle. Meanwhile, general mobilization produced the forward deployment of six Peruvian divisions along the coastal plain, as well as the equivalent of four Ecuadorean brigades to their immediate front. With fleets at sea, high-performance aircraft forward-deployed, and combat in the Cenepa region, the danger of escalation was significant. By mid-February, however, as the extent of casualties and the economic impact of the fighting became increasingly clear, a battlefield stalemate developed. Diplomatic pressure from the guarantor nations of the 1942

protocol brought the parties to the negotiating table and ultimately to a peace agreement, the Declaration of Itamaraty on March 17, 1995.

The declaration required that both sides cease hostilities, demobilize, and support activities of a military observer mission provided by the guarantors that had an initial mandate of ninety days and could be extended on request of the parties. The accord's language provided for the separation of forces under observer supervision and obligated observers to establish operations centers and recommend an "area to be totally demilitarized" by each side. The accord committed both parties and guarantors to construct a definition of procedures for the observer mission which would detail its organization and employment. Finally, it committed the two parties to begin substantive talks, with the assistance of the guarantors, on the underlying border issue, with a view to demarcation and a return to normal relations.

Brazil's offer to provide a general officer as the chief of the observer mission was accepted by the guarantors with qualifications. Deliberations over the definition of procedures, principally on the issue of command relationships, lasted for almost a month, during which time a number of cease-fire violations erupted in the conflict

Reaching outpost by air.



U.S. Army (Douglas Ibe)



U.S. Army (Douglas Ibe)

Briefing visitors at Coangos.

zone and around isolated outposts along the demarcated border some 60 kilometers to the northeast.

A compromise on command relationships was finally reached in early March. To preserve the coequal status of guarantor contingents, the Brazilian general was defined as coordinator rather than commander. Each nation would contribute up to ten officers as observers, led by a colonel, and the United States would provide an element consisting of aviation, operations, intelligence, communications, and logistical support.

The Brazilian general would exercise operational control (OPCON) over the observers from all four nations, while the colonels retained command

for administrative and disciplinary purposes, less OPCON, over their contingents. The U.S. colonel would retain command as well as OPCON over the support element. The political direction of the mission would be exercised via a committee consisting of a representative of the Brazilian foreign ministry and the ambassadors of Argentina, Chile, and the United States resident in Brasilia. (This function was later assumed by a group of so-called high functionaries who represented the guarantors directly from their respective capitals.) The ad hoc committee of ambassadors was advised by attachés in Brasilia, under the coordination of a general officer from Brazil's armed forces general staff.

## MOMEP Deploys

On March 10, the definition of procedures was signed. Late that same night, a JCS execute order was released permitting deployment of the U.S. contingent. An advance party of the support element arrived in Ecuador and began to receive deployment aircraft at Patuca and Macas, a C-130-capable strip some 60 kilometers to the north. The observer contingents deployed from Brasilia on March 11, dividing between the Peruvian regional military headquarters at El Milagro and the Ecuadorean base at Patuca.

The coordinator, Lieutenant General Candido Vargas de Freire from Brazil, and a staff that consisted of senior colonels from each national contingent, arrived at Patuca on March 12. There they found that the U.S. support element had established headquarters facilities, an encampment for troops, and barracks for observers on a base occupied by the Ecuadorean 21<sup>st</sup> Jungle Infantry Brigade. UH-60s had arrived earlier that day, self-deploying from an intermediate staging base at Guayaquil. As the sun fell behind the mountains, the MOMEP staff met to spell out an approach to operations and a strategy for initial contacts with local commanders of the two parties.

## Concept of Operations

U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) had analyzed the mission and provided the U.S. contingent commander with guidance on certain fundamentals. For example, no operation would be undertaken unless it led to achieving the results outlined in the Declaration of Itamaraty; also, the safety of personnel and equipment was paramount. MOMEP had no mandate to enforce the peace since it was only constituted to observe and verify compliance under the terms of the accord. For those reasons, the United States adopted a policy of no foot patrols in the conflict zone because of the danger of mines and the proximity of the contesting forces, and forbade use of the helicopters of either party for observer operations. The U.S. representative also stressed the requirement for the parties to accept a defined demilitarized zone (DMZ) as a precondition for operations.

General Freire felt strongly that the DMZ was too sensitive an issue to raise at this point; the parties would begin endless haggling, preventing the mission from proceeding to the separation of forces. To Freire, the DMZ represented the end result of MOMEF actions rather than a control measure for conducting operations. Nonetheless a general outline for a four-phase operation was accepted. Describing the conditions for both parties, and the corresponding tasks for MOMEF, it contemplated a preparatory phase (MOMEF deployment, liaison, a security area as a substitute for the DMZ, and initial requirements for the order of battle in the area), supervision of the cease-fire, separation of belligerent forces, and finally the demobilization of units outside the conflict zone and establishment of the DMZ. This concept was accepted by both parties.

In the meantime, Latin American observers, less U.S. counterparts and

### MOMEF concentrated on observer reliefs and plans to separate forces in the security area

communications, deployed to two concentration points by Peruvian and Ecuadorean helicopters and relieved attachés who had acted as interim observers while the Brasilia negotiations were concluded. On March 17, UH-60s brought a complete multinational observer team to Coangos. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, the requisite assurances of control over air defense weapons were obtained from Peru, and a U.S. observer and communicator were transported to PV1 to join Argentinean, Brazilian, and Chilean observers who rotated by Peruvian helicopters from El Milagro. From then on, relief of both posts was conducted at 3-day intervals (weather permitting) without incident.

### Separation of Forces

Between March 12 and 31, MOMEF concentrated on conducting observer reliefs at the two concentration points and preparing plans to separate forces in the security area. The two parties had cooperated with the



Source: U.S. Southern Command.

mission requirement to submit a listing of units, personnel, and weapons in the area but were reluctant to trust the other party to comply with MOMEF directives. The staff considered a series of factors in preparing the plan before communicating it to the parties:

- Units were intermingled on the battlefield due to the density of the jungle and the narrow concealed trails between fighting positions. Mines had been emplaced throughout the area—some 6,000 by Ecuador alone—often without proper registry. Generalized withdrawals were certain to provoke firing incidents or mine injuries.

- Ecuador had managed to infiltrate a unit into the Peruvian rear, capable of attacking their primary base at PV1 or cutting their main supply route into the upper Cenepa. It was clear that the Ecuadorean unit had to be removed at the start to permit future Peruvian withdrawals.

- Two contested bases, Tiwintza and Base Sur, were invested with a degree of emotional significance that far outweighed their political or military significance. Both sides claimed to have taken them. Ecuador insisted that MOMEF publicly take physical possession of their version of these bases to confirm its battlefield gains. MOMEF refused to do any such thing.

- Peru's national elections were scheduled for April 9. President Fujimori had announced the taking of Tiwintza and



U.S. Army

any action by MOMEF that tended to prove or disprove that statement would complicate Peru's domestic political situation.

■ Because of its relative logistical capabilities, Ecuador could conduct aerial extraction from a number of landing zones within the conflict area, but Peru had to move forces on foot to PV1 or Cueva de los Tallos for pickup by helicopters—a process that could require up to 48 hours for each unit, given the terrain and weather.

The MOMEF staff designed a six-week program of directed withdrawals of 60-odd units deployed in the conflict zone. Each side was told to first concentrate by echelon, drawing combat outposts and patrols to squad-level positions, and squads to platoons. They then received phased requirements for extraction of specific units. Each unit was notified to move to designated points. Helicopters then took them to the MOMEF observers, who logged in departing soldiers, weapons, and equipment. Troops moved on from there by air and road (in the case of Ecuador) to garrisons. This procedure, despite evident flaws from an accountability standpoint, resulted in the extraction of over 5,000 soldiers, without incident, in just five weeks. It was successful simply because the parties were eager to comply with a process that permitted them to disengage without renouncing their honor or territorial claims and the fact that MOMEF provided a veneer of control.

As the separation of forces continued, both Ecuador and Peru pressured

**Military representatives of guarantor nations (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the United States) and MOMEF coordinator general.**

MOMEF to verify demobilization in areas outside of the conflict zone. Sensing eagerness on the part of

both sides to demobilize, the staff directed them to provide a demobilization plan to MOMEF. Then the staff met with both liaison officers to construct a simultaneous and proportional schedule of withdrawals into peacetime garrisons of those units deployed forward during the conflict.

From May 3 to 13, two MOMEF verification teams traveled to various demobilization sites on each side of the border. Each received a briefing by the unit commander, presided at formal demobilization ceremonies, and inspected the garrison or abandoned position to verify that forces had returned to a peacetime readiness posture. The verification was admittedly superficial, given the rapid pace of demobilization and small size of the observer mission. Nonetheless, by May 13 each side had substantially returned to its pre-conflict military posture. If slight variations existed in the postwar configuration of forward units in peacetime garrisons, they were not significant enough to permit either side a destabilizing capability.

## DMZ Agreement

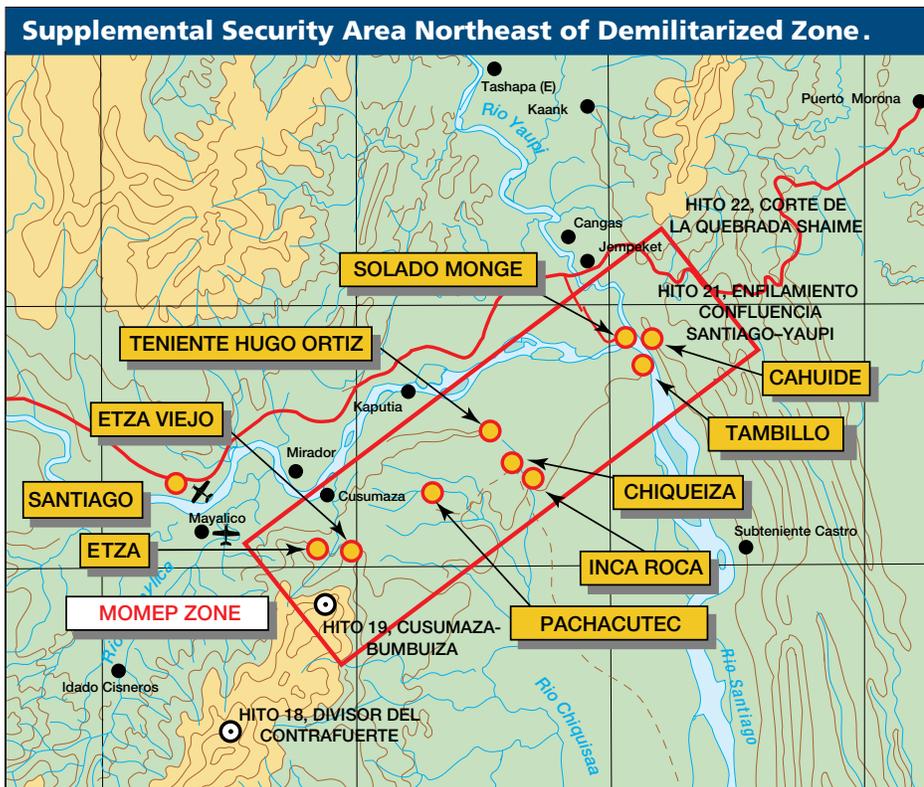
By early May 1995, MOMEF had accomplished most of the specified tasks in the Itamaraty accord and also settled into a routine of aerial patrols over the security area, relief of observers on Coangos and PV1, and periodic insertion of operations centers at Base Sur and Tiwintza. With the upper Cenepa clear of troops except for token forces at Coangos and PV1, MOMEF had achieved conditions for the recommendation to the parties of a DMZ, as required in the mandate.

Six options which had been prepared as early as April ranged from a narrow strip between Coangos and PV1 to a 20 kilometer strip that ran the length of the border. Each was analyzed from the standpoint of military justification and political significance. MOMEF had to maintain complete impartiality and divorce the DMZ from ultimate adjudications of territorial claims while considering each side's view of its sovereign interests.

Accordingly, MOMEF proposed to guarantor diplomats in Brasilia that the existing security area become the DMZ with garrisons of 50 troops at PV1 and Coangos. The recommendation was delivered on May 3. While Peru accepted immediately, Ecuador rejected it, citing that it was unjust and betrayed earlier MOMEF assurances that the security area was not to be related "either to a final border solution or to a demilitarized area." At the heart of Ecuador's protest was a minor logistics base, Banderas, within the DMZ.

During the last stage of the separation, the Ecuadorean liaison officer brought up the issue with MOMEF, stating that Ecuador should not be required to evacuate Banderas, because it was in uncontested Ecuadorean territory and had long been the site of a border detachment. He based the continued need for occupying Banderas on the security and humanitarian support of the indigenous population of 60 to 70 families.

Two-tiered negotiations by guarantor high functionaries and the vice foreign ministers of Peru and Ecuador were held on June 19–26. While the diplomats dealt with normalizing relations, the MOMEF staff explored DMZ adjustments and a draft definition of



Source: U.S. Southern Command.

hito=boundary marker

procedures with the liaison officers. However as the Ecuadorean presence at Banderas was revealed, the Peruvians threatened to break off negotiations. MOMEPE met through the night of

### this agreement was announced at the closing of the Hemispheric Defense Ministerial in Williamsburg

June 25–26, promoting an adjustment that had been sketched out in a private meeting between the liaison officers. Both sides informed the guarantors that they wished to suspend talks to consult their respective capitals. The MOMEPE staff returned to Patuca faced with the obligation to take action regarding the apparent Ecuadorean presence at Banderas.

At the urging of the guarantor diplomats, the MOMEPE staff initiated a three-week series of meetings with the liaison officers in Quito and Lima to break the impasse. Based on adjustments drafted in Brasilia and a MOMEPE

verification team situated at Banderas, a compromise was finally reached. An historic meeting was arranged in Lima for July 24–25 for the two liaison officers to sign a DMZ agreement on behalf of their respective governments. It described a quadrangle (see the inset map on page 55) covering the majority of the security area but left Banderas excluded. As a confidence measure, each side agreed to periodic inspections near the DMZ to assure an equilibrium of forces.

News of this historic agreement was transmitted in time to be announced by Secretary of Defense William Perry at the closing session of the Hemispheric Defense Ministerial that was being held in Williamsburg—a fitting example of regional cooperation on defense issues in line with the principles enunciated at that important meeting.

## MOMEPE II

With the establishment of the demilitarized zone on August 1, the MOMEPE staff returned to negotiating procedures for continuing the mission. Early on, U.S. Ambassador Luigi Einaudi had outlined a long-term plan whereby most observer tasks would be turned over to military officers of the parties to permit a drawdown of guarantor presence. This approach, together with an expanded MOMEPE mandate to verify demobilization and demilitarization, was at the heart of the draft given to the liaison officers. The integration would be conducted incrementally from the top down over ninety days and result in a combined MOMEPE staff, support element staff, and observer teams.

Both parties agreed in principle to this approach at the Brasilia talks. But at Quito in early August they opted for a more gradual integration process linked to diplomatic progress but not to a drawdown of MOMEPE. As stipulated in the draft, the liaison officers wanted an effective veto on withdrawing guarantor observers from the mission. While the United States favored more rapid integration, the consensus was that changes in the wording would not be accepted by both parties. All concerned recognized the implicit right of the guarantors to make decisions with regard to the continued commitment of their observers; as a result, the definition of procedures was endorsed by the guarantor high functionaries and accepted by the governments of the two parties on August 22.

With this success and the stage set for integration and negotiations on the underlying issue, a situation arose that threatened to derail the peace process.<sup>3</sup> Since the completion of the separation of forces in May, a number of cease-fire violations had occurred in areas adjacent to, although not part of, the security area/DMZ. Between May 3 and September 30, the two parties reported over 20 incidents accompanied by pleas for MOMEPE intervention. Many involved mines which resulted in three killed and one wounded, and small arms fire which escalated to mortar and artillery duels. In both cases, each party accused the other of deliberately provoking the incident and attempting

to sabotage the peace process. Refusing to endanger observers, and wary of exceeding its mandate, MOMEF exhorted the parties to cease active patrolling, concentrate in border outposts, and remove indirect fire weapons from the area. But neither side would comply without MOMEF verification.

The mission adopted a strategy similar to that which had produced favorable results earlier. An area extending 10 kilometers to either side of the demarcated border from the DMZ to a point east of the confluence of the

Yaupi and Santiago rivers was designated as a supplemental security area (see map); inventories of outposts, troops, and weapons were demanded from the two sides; and a phased withdrawal of garrisons and indirect fire weapons was designed, leaving a maximum of 80 soldiers for each side at the designated outposts. MOMEF observers verified that troops and weapons had arrived at the nearest battalion headquarters (Santiago, Ecuador, and Ampala, Peru).

These steps, together with increased helicopter patrols, helped stabilize the situation. Since March 1996,

18 officers from Peru and Ecuador have been integrated into MOMEF and the guarantor observer contingents have been reduced to four members each. The U.S. support element remains at a strength of 60 troops. A long-standing policy on border contacts has been readopted by both sides, and significant progress has been made on the diplomatic front. The January 1996 meeting of foreign ministers in Lima led to a formula for sustained negotiations on the underlying issue.

With a minimal investment in resources by the guarantors of the 1942 Protocol of Rio de Janeiro, MOMEF can claim extraordinary success in managing the situation both at the tactical level and through participation in negotiations to establish the demilitarized zone as well as the structure of an extended (and integrated) peace observer mission. Substantive negotiations on demarcation are the next step for guarantor diplomats. The hope is that integrating both parties into the observer mission will obviate armed encounters and also produce a climate of confidence and self-reliance in which to negotiate. The fear is that without continued participation by guarantor observers in day-to-day operations, the mission could lose credibility and control as diplomats deal with the lengthy and difficult problem of achieving mutual concessions to produce a final settlement. **JFQ**

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See William L. Krieg, *Ecuadorian-Peruvian Rivalry in the Upper Amazon* (Washington: Department of State, External Research Program, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> This overview is based on a combination of SOUTHCOM reports and briefing material provided to MOMEF by the liaison officers of the two parties.

<sup>3</sup> The sources for events that occurred after the author's departure on August 23, 1995 are SOUTHCOM reports and interviews with both Colonel Steve Fee, U.S. contingent commander, and Coronel Jorge H. Gomez Pola, senior Argentinean representative to MOMEF.

11 FEBRUARY 1996

DECLARATION OF COMMITMENT TO PEACE  
BETWEEN ECUADOR AND PERU  
BY THE GUARANTOR NATIONS' ARMED FORCES

Recognizing the successful efforts by the armed forces of Ecuador and Peru to support the peace process by showing constraint, discipline, and professionalism, fully integrating Ecuadorian and Peruvian observers into the Military Observer Mission (MOMEF), and creating the conditions for peaceful diplomatic negotiations we acknowledge these five principles:

1. To further encourage the Ecuadorian and Peruvian armed forces to move toward increased trust, openness, and candor in their bilateral military relations.
2. To fully support the diplomatic initiatives toward peace undertaken by our respective governments, as well as to encourage the diplomatic bilateral efforts conducted by the governments of Ecuador and Peru.
3. To maintain open communication and transparent actions between Ecuador and Peru and the military commands of the guarantor countries and to share our observations with each other in order to further the cause of peace.
4. To develop confidence and security-building measures between the Ecuadorian and Peruvian armed forces as means to reduce tension and discourage any future armed conflict to resolve differences.
5. To continue our commitment to the Military Observer Mission Ecuador Peru (MOMEF), provided there is continuous progress toward the peaceful resolution of the dispute between Ecuador and Peru.

We pledge to meet together as necessary to strengthen our firm resolution to promote unity and friendship between the armed forces of Ecuador and Peru. Having visited Lima and Quito together on 9 through 11 February 1996, we declare our mutual support and commitment to peace between Ecuador and Peru.

Lieut. Gen. Mario Cándido Díaz  
Chief of the Joint Staff  
ARGENTINA

General Benedito Onofre Bezerra Leonel  
Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff  
BRAZIL

Lieut. Gen. Raúl Tapia Esdale  
Chief of the National Defense Staff  
CHILE

General Barry R. McCaffrey  
CINC, U.S. Southern Command  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA