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## Ecuador: The Nature Conservancy conspires with the United States Embassy and USAID for the adoption of the Biodiversity Bill

Tracing back the background of United States pressure on Ecuadorian politics could take us very far back in time and consume many pages. However, in order to analyze recent events, we should mention the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) ministerial summit meeting held in Miami in November 2002, where the United States lost power and had to accept the Brazilian proposal for a “more flexible FTAA.” Also decisive was the establishment of the Group of 22 (under the initiative of Brazil, China and India, demanding the elimination of the strong Northern agricultural subsidies) during the World Trade Organization ministerial conference in Cancun.

Faced by the obstacles to their interests of trade expansion, the United States has sought a strategy involving the signing of bilateral agreements, strongly promoted by the Bush administration. With these they manage to maintain barriers protecting some industrial sectors and to introduce additional tariffs.

On 18 November 2003, the United States trade representative Robert Zoellick presented a letter to United States Congress, describing the reasons for the foreign and trade policy, negotiating a free trade area with Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia.

And one thing leads to another. In order to sign a bilateral agreement with the United States and “access its market,” the country in question must undertake a series of changes. The Ambassador, Kristy Kenny declared that if Ecuador wants to reach the negotiation table for a bilateral free-trade agreement, it must make a series of legislative changes regarding the environment, biodiversity, intellectual property and labour issues, among others.

It is in this framework that pressure is being exerted in Ecuador for the adoption of a controversial Biodiversity Bill, promoting, among other things, strategic control of biodiversity-rich areas. On 15 January this year, an important meeting was held at the Quito office of the US-based organization The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The participants, in addition to the hosting NGO, were representatives of the Ecuadorian Environmental NGOs, CEDA (Ecuadorian Centre for Environmental Law), Ecociencia, the Natura Foundation, the Rumicocha Foundation – some of these are “partners” of TNC – and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The objective of the meeting was to “Establish a high level strategy for lobbying, designating the roles and tasks of TNC partner organizations, USAID and U.S. Embassy, in order to put pressure on the members of the National Congress for the adoption of the Biodiversity Bill, during its second debate.” Thus a first “low profile” stage was defined (lasting 2 months), during which work would be carried out with the members of the Health, Environmental and Ecological Protection Commissions of the National Congress towards the adoption of the Biodiversity Bill Report. Following this, strong lobbying was to be undertaken with the political party blocks to get the bill adopted at the plenary, and by the President of the Republic, approaching and lobbying the Presidential Legal Advisory Office and members of the Patriotic Society Party. The second stage would have a “high profile” with pressure exerted through a short-lasting mass campaign on radio, television and in the press,

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communicating and publicising the bill.

The obvious questions are: “Is this not an overt interference in the internal matters of a sovereign country? Is it acceptable that a foreign embassy openly conspires to put pressure on a freely elected parliament to get a tailor-made bill adopted? For whom is this law so important? What interests would it benefit and to whom would it cause damage?”

The fact is that this bill would enable, among other things, protected areas to be privatized and collective rights to be ignored. Under its article 21, it authorizes “the participation of ...non-governmental conservationist organizations and research institutions” in the planning, coordination, control and assessment of the management of the national protected areas system. Article 29 authorizes the Ministry of the Environment to enable participation by public, private or joint bodies, through concessions, delegation and other legal figures, in the goods and services of the Protected Areas Heritage. And this is where TNC comes in.

TNC is a powerful United States NGO, with a strategy for access and management of protected areas on a world level which fits perfectly into the United States strategy of controlling areas in countries – such as Ecuador – which are rich in biodiversity (see the article on Indonesia in this same Bulletin). Thus, TNC has received generous donations by the United States government for contracts or purchase of land, amounting to 174 million dollars between 1997 and 2001 and some additional 142 million dollars during the year 2000.

In its eagerness to make environmental results coincide with business, TNC works with major corporations. What is more, several of them are members of its board of directors. Among the companies with a poor environmental reputation that have contributed to TNC for the purchase of lands and other activities are: the BP oil company, General Motors, Orvis, MBNA, Centex House, Georgia Pacific Corp., 3M, Bank of America, Busch Entertainment, The Republic of Tea, the Home Depot, American Electric Power, Boeing, General Electric, Merrill Lynch, Millstone Coffee.

The close links between certain environmental NGOs and United States research institutes with the private business sector should be closely followed by all those who are backing the real defence of nature, of which human beings are also part and which they are responsible for. Some peoples understood this in the past and acted consequently, but modern neo-liberal development with its econometric and technical knowledge and its tax year urgencies, is increasingly getting out of its depth regarding wisdom and even the conservation instinct.

The people of Ecuador know this, and are alert, yet again in defence of their past and their future.

Article based on information from: “Alerta urgente desde el Ecuador. The Nature Conservancy conspira con Embajada de Estados Unidos y la AID para la aprobación de Ley de Biodiversidad”, Acción Ecológica communiqué sent by Cecilia Chérrez, Acción Ecológica/Instituto de Estudios Ecologistas del Tercer Mundo, e-mail: [instituto@accionecologica.org](mailto:instituto@accionecologica.org) ; “El TLC bilateral Ecuador-Estados Unidos oculta demasiado”, Acción Ecológica, [http://alainet.org/active/show\\_text.php3?key=5639](http://alainet.org/active/show_text.php3?key=5639) ; “Ayuda Memoria Reunión de Estrategia Ley de Biodiversidad”, 15 January 2004

