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## An Unseen Force: Indigenous Soldiers in the Ecuadorian Armed Forces

By Nicole Benalcázar-Pavlik

Indigenous groups in Latin America have played an important role in the region's wars and battles, from anti-colonial rebellions in the 16th century to the Cenepa War in 1995. Today, indigenous peoples continue to enlist in the military and serve in various capacities. This paper uses Ecuador as a case study to gain insight into the nature of indigenous participation in the armed forces, examining roles in the military, cultural practices, and reasons for enlistment. While many countries in Latin America are worthy of research on this subject, Ecuador is a particularly unique country to study due to its sizable indigenous population and its constitutional status as a “plurinational” state that recognizes indigenous peoples.

The Ecuadorian constitution, ratified in 2008, defines the country as a “plurinational state,” a system of governance that establishes justice, liberty, respect, and equal development for all regions and cultures.<sup>1</sup> About 1.1 million Ecuadorians<sup>2</sup> – 6.2 percent of its people – make up Ecuador’s diverse indigenous population and comprise 14 different nationalities.<sup>3</sup> Most indigenous Ecuadorians live in the Andes (68.2 percent) while the rest live in the Amazon (24.1 percent) and the coast (7.6 percent).<sup>4</sup> Some live in urban areas while others live in isolated indigenous communities. Article 57 of the Ecuadorian constitution recognizes these communities and delineates several rights, including the right to maintain ownership of their lands, uphold and strengthen their identity, and protection from discrimination.<sup>5</sup> While Spanish is the official language of Ecuador, Article 2 of the constitution declares Kichwa, spoken in the Andes and Amazon,<sup>6</sup> and Shuar, spoken in the Amazon,<sup>7</sup> as official languages for “intercultural ties.”<sup>8</sup> It provides various protections as well for indigenous soldiers. In accordance with Articles 160 and 230 of this constitution, all who wish to participate in the armed forces may enlist, and the military and police may not discriminate or infringe upon the rights of any



Photo caption: Indigenous soldiers at the entrance to the Iwias School.

participant, regardless of ethnicity.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these numerous legal protections, inequality between indigenous groups and the rest of the population is apparent. The latest data (2019) reveals that 53 percent of indigenous peoples live in poverty as compared to 25 percent of the national population in the same year.<sup>10</sup> This percentage has likely increased as indigenous peoples were disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>11</sup> In terms of education, 16.3 percent have at least a high school degree, as compared to 42.4 percent of the population overall,<sup>12</sup> and according to the latest national census (2010), 20.4 percent of the indigenous population is illiterate, as opposed to 6.8 percent of the entire population.<sup>13</sup> Despite these circumstances, indigenous Ecuadorians have proven to be powerful political actors, in some

<sup>1</sup> Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, “Proyecto Político de la CONAIE 2012,” Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, last modified July 21, 2015, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://conaie.org/2015/07/21/proyecto-politico-conaie-2012/>.

<sup>2</sup> International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, “Indigenous peoples in Ecuador,” International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed July 25, 2022, <https://www.iwgia.org/en/ecuador.html>.

<sup>3</sup> International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, *El Mundo Indígena 2022*, 408, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.iwgia.org/es/recursos/mundo-indigena>.

<sup>4</sup> International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, *El Mundo*, 408.

<sup>5</sup> Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, “Constitución de la República del Ecuador” [Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador], Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, accessed July 14, 2022, [https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ec/sites/default/files/documents/old/constitucion\\_de\\_bolsillo.pdf](https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ec/sites/default/files/documents/old/constitucion_de_bolsillo.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, *Asignatura optativa: Lengua Kichwa*, 5, 2016, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://educacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2016/10/Asignatura-Optativa-Lengua-Kichwa-LL-3BGU.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, “Shuar,” Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, last modified July 19, 2014, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://conaie.org/2014/07/19/shuar/>.

<sup>8</sup> Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, “Constitución de la República,” Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador.

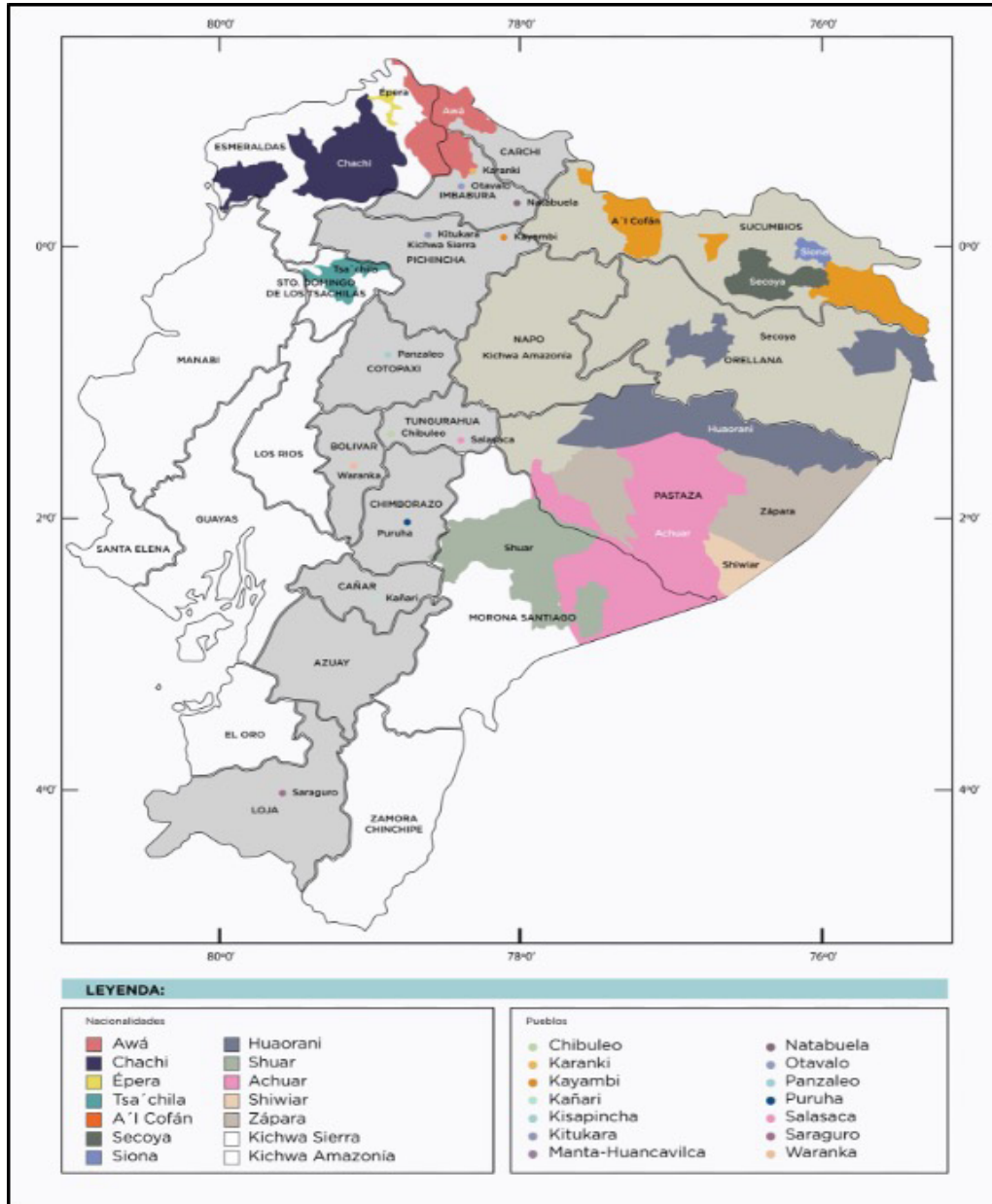
<sup>9</sup> Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, “Constitución de la República,” Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank LAC Equity Lab, “Ethnicity: Poverty,” World Bank, last modified May 2021, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/lac-equity-lab1/ethnicity/ethnicity-poverty>.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *The impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples in Latin America (Abya Yala)* (Santiago, Chile, 2021), 10.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank LAC Equity Lab, “LAC Equity Lab: Ethnicity - Socio-demographics,” World Bank, last modified May 2021, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/lac-equity-lab1/ethnicity/ip-population>.

<sup>13</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, *Resultados del Censo 2010 de la Población y Vivienda en el Ecuador*, 2-3, 2010, accessed July 18, 2022, [https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/wp-content/descargas/Presentaciones/capitulo\\_educacion\\_censo\\_poblacion\\_vivienda.pdf](https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/wp-content/descargas/Presentaciones/capitulo_educacion_censo_poblacion_vivienda.pdf).



**Map of Indigenous Nationalities and Communities in Ecuador**

Source: Proyecto Oralidad y Modernidad – Geolingüística Ecuador

cases, sparking policy change and unseating presidents.

Nevertheless, since the times when Incan general Rumiñahui led the resistance against Spanish colonization,<sup>14</sup> indigenous Ecuadorians continue to enlist in the armed forces. Today, indigenous Ecu-

dorians make up 8.2 percent of the army<sup>15</sup> and serve the military in the various roles. Soldiers are tasked with supporting education, vaccine distribution, national development, and support of the police force in accordance with the constitution.<sup>16</sup> Some serve as

<sup>14</sup> Rodrigo Fierro Benítez, "Rumiñahui, General quiteño," *El Comercio* (Quito, Ecuador), January 17, 2013, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.elcomercio.com/opinion/ruminahui-general-quiteno.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Ejército Ecuatoriano, Ejército en Acción Escuela de Iwias," video, YouTube, posted by Ecuadorian Army, November 11, 2021, accessed July 11, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPKYVFfTsyw>.

<sup>16</sup> Colonel Gustavo Iturralde, interview by the author, Washington DC, July 6, 2022.

guides as well.<sup>17</sup> Usually, soldiers, including those who are indigenous, serve in the regions where they grew up due to their familiarity with these areas.<sup>18</sup> However, as they move up in the ranks, the locations they serve extend beyond their native regions.<sup>19</sup>

**Table: Ethnic Breakdown of Ecuadorian Army**

Ethnic Group	Number	Percentage
Indigenous	2,043	8.2 percent
Montubios	122	0.5 percent
Afro-Ecuadorian	1,777	7.1 percent
Mestizo	20,875	83.6 percent

Source: Ecuadorian Army, November 2021

In addition to upholding constitutional protections, the military allows indigenous soldiers to continue to practice their customs and traditions. For instance, although all male soldiers are required to keep their hair short, indigenous soldiers are exempted from this obligation out of respect for their cultural practices.<sup>20</sup> For many indigenous communities in the Andean region, braids are sacred, signifying loyalty to one's community,<sup>21</sup> and cutting these braids can indicate rejection of one's culture.<sup>22</sup> In the Ecuadorian Army's official videos, indigenous soldiers are shown proudly wearing their hair in braids.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, although Spanish is the primary language spoken in military training schools, due to tradition, soldiers may choose to speak Kichwa, a language spoken by the majority

of indigenous communities in the Andes.<sup>24</sup>

Indigenous soldiers may join any of the 14 military training schools in Ecuador.<sup>25</sup> Each of these schools accepts candidates from all backgrounds, with the exception of the School of Iwias (Escuela de Iwias, or EIWIAS), which trains only indigenous Amazonians. The only school of its kind in the world,<sup>26</sup> EIWIAS was officially founded in 2008,<sup>27</sup> but its conception originated in the 1970s when, due to the threat of war with Peru, Ecuadorian Colonel Gonzalo Barragán imagined the creation of indigenous Amazonian combat units.<sup>28</sup> War eventually did break out between the two countries in 1995 and indigenous soldiers from this region played an essential role throughout the conflict.<sup>29</sup>



**Photo caption:** Ecuadorian soldiers observe a training exercise.

<sup>17</sup> Iturralde, interview by the author.

<sup>18</sup> Iturralde, interview by the author.

<sup>19</sup> Iturralde, interview by the author.

<sup>20</sup> Iturralde, interview by the author.

<sup>21</sup> Diario el Mercurio, "En trenza radica identidad de nacionalidades andinas" [In braids lies the identity of Andean nationalities], Centro Interamericano de Artesanías y Artes Populares, last modified September 2018, accessed July 22, 2022, [http://documentacion.cidap.gob.ec:8080/bitstream/cidap/1959/1/En percent20trenza percent20radica percent20identidad percent20de percent20nacionalidades percent20andinas.pdf](http://documentacion.cidap.gob.ec:8080/bitstream/cidap/1959/1/En%20trenza%20radica%20identidad%20de%20nacionalidades%20andinas.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> El Comercio, "La Trenza es el Sello de Identidad y Fidelidad con la Cultura Andina" [Braids are a Seal of Identity and Loyalty to Andean Culture], *El Comercio* (Quito, Ecuador), April 25, 2016, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.elcomercio.com/tendencias/sociedad/trenza-identidad-fidelidad-culturaandinasaraguro.html>.

<sup>23</sup> "Ejército Ecuatoriano," video.

<sup>24</sup> Iturralde, interview by the author.

<sup>25</sup> *Revista El Ejército Nacional*, February 2019, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Kléver Antonio Bravo and Fanny Lucía Cevallos, *Iwias: Escuela de Soldados Nativos de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana, un Modelo de Educación Militar Intercultural*, ed. Pat Paterson, 2020 Edition 3 (Washington D.C.: William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, 2020), 2, accessed July 11, 2022, [https://www.williamjerrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_associated\\_files/TWIAS percent20- percent20Escuela percent20de percent20Soldados percent20Nativos percent20de percent20la percent20Amazonia percent20Ecuatoriana.pdf](https://www.williamjerrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication_associated_files/TWIAS%20-%20Escuela%20de%20Soldados%20Nativos%20de%20la%20Amazonia%20Ecuatoriana.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Bravo and Cevallos, *Iwias: Escuela*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Bravo and Cevallos, *Iwias: Escuela*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Kléver Antonio Bravo Calle, Ana Elizabeth Cobos Guerrero, and Fanny Lucía Cevallos Ortega, *Breve estudio académico de las Escuelas Iwias, soldados nativos de la Amazonía ecuatoriana* (Congreso de Ciencia y Tecnología ESPE, 2018), 168, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://journal.espe.edu.ec/ojs/index.php/cienciaytecnologia/article/view/712>.

Located in the Pastaza region, EIWAS attracts candidates from various indigenous groups including the Shuar, Secoya, and Kichwa tribes<sup>30</sup> and trains them to utilize their cultural and ancestral knowledge to complete special missions in the Ecuadorian jungle.<sup>31</sup> Their familiarity with the Amazonian terrain and understanding of the healing properties of plants puts these aspiring “Iwias” – meaning “jungle demons” in Shuar – in a unique position to effectively carry out these missions.<sup>32</sup> In addition to their physical training, these aspiring soldiers study various subjects, including oral and written communication, military history, human rights, ecology, leadership, and indigenous ancestral culture.<sup>33</sup> In order to train with EIWAS, soldiers are evaluated on their ability to not only speak Spanish but also a native language.<sup>34</sup> These soldiers cite desires to receive military training, have a career, preserve their culture, and be a community leader as reasons to train with this school.<sup>35</sup>

Inclusion of indigenous women in the armed forces has also been a noteworthy discussion point. Following the adoption of UNSCR 1325, which emphasized the need to increase women’s participation in security and peacemaking, nations across the globe have sought to increase women’s participation in the armed forces. However, in Latin America, only four percent of the armed forces are comprised of women,<sup>36</sup> and in Ecuador specifically, women represent two percent of the army, four percent of the navy, four percent of

the air force, and 15 percent of the national police.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the Ecuadorian police force has made strides in this regard, holding the first graduation of indigenous Amazonian women in 2020.<sup>38</sup> Recognizing the importance of creating connections with indigenous communities, Taiz Valdiviezo Tivi, one of the graduates of this cohort of 106 women, explained that she will be able to gain information and support indigenous communities in a more personal manner due to her familiarity with these communities and their customs and traditions.<sup>39</sup> Keme Alvarado Nequimo, another graduate, emphasized that she can enter her community without resistance and explain that the police will help.<sup>40</sup> These women will be able to access areas that their non-indigenous military peers cannot.<sup>41</sup>



**Photo caption:** An Ecuadorian soldier stands at the entrance to the Escuela de Iwias.

<sup>30</sup> “Ejército Ecuatoriano,” video.

<sup>31</sup> “Demonios de la Selva,” video, YouTube, posted by Visión 360, October 13, 2017, accessed July 11, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCYmp\\_KpYaQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCYmp_KpYaQ).

<sup>32</sup> “Demonios de la Selva,” video.

<sup>33</sup> Bravo and Cevallos, *Iwias: Escuela*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Iturralde, interview by the author.

<sup>35</sup> Bravo and Cevallos, *Iwias: Escuela*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Marcela Donadio, *La Mujer en las Instituciones Armadas y Policiales*, 56, 2009, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.resdal.org/genero-y-paz/ebook/Libro-mujer-RESDAL.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Byron Gabriel Paredes Escobar et al., *Ecuador - Summary Report*, 3, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://wiiglobal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Ecuador-Summary-Report.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> “La Primera Promoción de Mujeres Indígenas Policías en Ecuador,” video, YouTube, posted by Ecuavisa, March 4, 2020, accessed July 11, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao4kJ8n4fb4>.

<sup>39</sup> “La Primera,” video.

<sup>40</sup> “La Primera,” video.

<sup>41</sup> “La Primera,” video.

Overrepresented in the Ecuadorian Army (they account for six percent of the national population, but make up eight percent of the Ecuadorian Army), indigenous Ecuadorians serve in the armed forces for various reasons, citing their desires to represent their respective indigenous communities, serve their nation, defend their territory, and bring honor to their families as reasons to pursue this career path.<sup>42</sup> In the United States, Native Americans have also contributed significantly to the armed forces. Making up two percent of the United States population<sup>43</sup> and one percent of its active duty military,<sup>44</sup> Native Americans serve at the highest rate per capita compared to any other ethnic group.<sup>45</sup> Although Native Americans serve for various reasons, an important area of overlap with indigenous Ecuadorians is their desire to demonstrate patriotism and defend their territory.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, despite their noteworthy contributions to the armed forces, these high rates of participation have not translated to significant social, political, or economic improvements for both groups.

### *Final Thoughts*

The facts presented in this paper reveal that indigenous Ecuadorians contribute significantly to the country's armed forces. In the Ecuadorian army, indigenous soldiers and police serve in various capacities, in some cases reaching areas that other soldiers cannot. Although Ecuador has made significant strides in promoting equality and recognition of indigenous

peoples within the armed forces, areas for improvement remain, particularly as it relates to highlighting indigenous soldiers' contributions and translating these contributions to social, political, and economic improvements.



**Photo caption:** An armed platoon of soldiers from Ecuador's Iwias school in formation.

One significant barrier to increased recognition of indigenous soldiers is the lack of data relating to this group. Although the Ecuadorian army has published an ethnic breakdown of its army, almost all countries in Latin America either do not collect official data on this subject or have not publicized this information. A greater understanding of representation in the armed forces is essential if government authorities hope to highlight indigenous soldiers and also further understand the status of indigenous groups in the region. Representation in the armed forces has numerous implications as it not only reveals what groups are considered citizens of a nation but also leads to better performance of the military as a whole.<sup>47</sup> In the end, all Ecuadorian military personnel, regardless of race, serve one flag, and spotlighting the contributions of all groups greatly benefits all soldiers, citizens, and the country as a whole.

<sup>42</sup> "Ejército Ecuatoriano," video.

<sup>43</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "American Indians and Alaska Natives - By the Numbers," Administration for Native Americans, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ana/fact-sheet/american-indians-and-alaska-natives-numbers>.

<sup>44</sup> United States Department of Defense, "Chapter 2: Active Duty Members," Military One Source, last modified 2020, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/chapter-2-race-ethnicity>.

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Army Reserve, "Native American Heritage," U.S. Army Reserve, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.usar.army.mil/NativeAmericanHeritage/>.

<sup>46</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Why We Serve," National Museum of the American Indian, last modified 2020, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://americanindian.si.edu/why-we-serve/>.

<sup>47</sup> Marshall Poe, episode 567, "Jason Lyall, 'Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War,'" December 14, 2021, in *New Books in Military History*, podcast, video, 54:23, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://newbooksnetwork.com/divided-armies>.

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