

# ADVENTURES IN MIDDLE EARTH



December 2019

The most notable event of 2019 in Ecuador was one that we missed. As we were wrapping up our four-month Home Ministry Assignment in the U.S., Ecuador's government discontinued 40-year-old fuel subsidies. The price of diesel doubled and the price of regular gas increased 24%. From October 3 through 13, Ecuador was rocked by strikes, road blockages, protests, sabotage of oil pipelines, and violence. About a week before our scheduled return on October 16, our mission emailed suggesting we consider delaying our return a week or two. Two other couples were returning the same week, and the mission didn't want any of us to return if things got worse and all of the missionaries had to leave the country.

We put off changing our flights until the 14th, since the situation was changing every day. But we packed up, put our pickup in storage in Eugene, and caught a ride to the Portland area on Saturday the 12th (we were flying out of Portland). Things were worsening in Quito that day, with the airport closed, more protesters arriving from the jungle and the mountains, a curfew imposed, and violence spreading into our neighborhood.

That evening we learned a new word, cacerolazo (banging on pans for peace), to go along with paro (the general term for the protests and strike) and toque de queda (curfew). All over the country people stood outside their homes and banged on pans for hours. A friend who has served in Ecuador for 39 years says this was the third cacerolazo she experienced, but the most widespread. It was a peaceful protest, the people saying, "We've had enough. Fix this."

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On Sunday the airport was still closed and the curfew still in effect. Food was becoming scarce since people had been stocking up and the protesters had successfully blocked all access to the city. That afternoon the government met with the protesters in a televised discussion. Scott listened via the internet and a resolution seemed hopeless. After several hours the two sides took a break and, when talks resumed, the government announced it was reinstating the fuel subsidies! Both sides agreed to cooperatively work out austerity measures which would protect the poor.

We returned as planned without problems and were very thankful. As we have talked with friends here, our general impression is that people are bruised, shocked and traumatized. A very common comment from both missionaries and Ecuadorians was, "This was the worst than it has ever been." Civil unrest is not new to Ecuador, but this paro was more widespread and better coordinated than anyone could remember, probably because of social media.

Another new word for us was minga, a Quichua word meaning a community project or work party. As the protesters left, people turned out to clean up parks and repair damage to buildings. Companies donated materials, delivered them to waiting volunteers and much was accomplished in a few days.

The economic recovery will take longer. Much economic activity stopped for eleven days. In addition, tourism is very important here and Ecuador's reputation as a destination has been damaged.

Another challenge is psychological recovery. Our mission has coordinated debriefings for our missionaries and staff, along with individual and group counseling. We're praying for all those affected and for the government and citizen groups as they try to chart a way out of crippling national debt. And we're praying for all of South America, as violence has erupted in Chile (and is still continuing), Bolivia's government was overthrown, and citizens are protesting in Colombia. Plus Venezuela continues to have extreme turmoil, resulting in 4 million Venezuelans fleeing in the last four years, about 260,000 of them to Ecuador.

Is there an upside to this? Certainly there was more fervent prayer in October than usual! People realized their need for God to intervene. We are confident God is working out his plan for the region and we want to join Him in what He's doing. He has always been faithful and someday we will look back and see His hand in these events.

**Thank you for sharing this journey with us. May your Christmas and New Year be blessed as you celebrate the Word becoming flesh and moving into our neighborhood.**