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U.S. Bible Group Leaving Ecuadorean Indians

QUITO, Ecuador, May 15 (AP) — The Bible-translating missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who for 30 years have worked with the Indians in the mountains and jungles of Ecuador, are preparing to leave by May 29 on orders of the Government.

The Government decision, made a year ago, stirred a national debate over the institute's work and the future of the indigenous people the 50 missionaries will leave behind.

In question is whether Ecuador can work with isolated Indian groups — some living in extremely primitive conditions — or whether, as a newspaper columnist suggested, their cultures

will die and their languages will be "sounds lost forever among the jungle's vegetable mass and river torrents."

"It looks like we're leaving for sure," William Eddy, the institute's public relations officer in Ecuador, said in a recent interview.

Extension Is Denied

He added that the Protestant-run institute had unsuccessfully appealed for an extension until 1985 to complete its mission in Ecuador, a predominantly Roman Catholic country.

The institute is the overseas arm of the United States-based Wycliffe Bible Translators, the world's largest Protestant missionary organization. It has more than 3,900 volunteers working around the world. About 1,000 volunteers work in Latin America.

One of its workers, Chester Allen Bitterman 3d of Lancaster, Pa., was kidnapped in Colombia in January 1981 by dissident members of the M-19 guerrilla movement, who charged that the institute was a front for the United States Central Intelligence Agency. The dissidents demanded that the institute leave Colombia, and when it refused, Mr. Bitterman was killed.

The institute's contract in Ecuador, like its contracts in other countries, lets it investigate aboriginal languages in return for helping Government-approved health, bilingual education and agricultural projects.

Its primary purpose — introducing primitive people to Christianity — has come under fire in recent years by some anthropologists who say it threatens traditional religious and cultural values.

Other opponents of the institute — including Latin American leftist groups, social workers and human-rights advocates — maintain that it wittingly or unwittingly serves the interests of the United States, especially by opening the jungles to oil companies by serving as intermediaries with hostile Indians.

More extreme charges, such as those made by the M-19 dissidents in Colombia, are that the missionaries are C.I.A. agents, smugglers and advocates of en-

forced sterilization.

The institute has denied all these charges.

The Ecuadorean Government said a major reason for breaking its contract with the institute was to stop the debate.

"The Government position is clear," Vladimir Serrano Pérez, Under Secretary of Government, said. "Ecuador is sufficiently mature to handle the cultural problems which exist in the country and to resolve them in an efficient manner."

He said an anthropological institute would be set up with support from the Catholic University of Ecuador and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to take over the missionaries' operations.

"The Government insists there are trained personnel prepared to take over the linguistic program," Mr. Eddy said. "But they are not out there: It looks like it will be abandoned."

His opinion is shared by most newspapers in the country, which generally have expressed regret that the institute is leaving.

Indian organizations are divided on the issue. Many of the most primitive people are so far from the mainstream of Ecuadorean society that they are not aware that their fate is of national concern.

The 50 missionaries in Ecuador include 22 linguists assigned to eight language groups, the Cayapa, Cofán, Colorado, Huaorani (Auca), Shuar (Jivaro), Secoya, Siona and Quechua.