

# 'It is truly terrifying': farmer bombed by US-Ecuador armies

Vicente Garrido, Vice President of San Martín on Ecuador's border with Colombia, speaks to The Grayzone's Oscar Leon about the bombings of his community's dairy farm by the Ecuadorian military. After US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth claimed credit for destroying a "narco-terror" training camp, local Ecuadorian media exposed the truth: Ecuadorian soldiers had bombed a farm, then abducted and tortured locals to cover up the attack. The Grayzone places this incident in the context of a pattern of crimes throughout the US "war on drugs" in the region, starting with the False Positives Scandal in Colombia during the 1990's, when US-trained Colombian soldiers massacred hundreds of leftist opponents and community leaders, then branded them as narco traffickers. Under President Daniel Noboa, a close US ally demonstrably implicated in the international narcotics trade, Ecuador is using the drug war as cover for the consolidation of a hyper-militarized state which brutalizes social movements and left-wing opposition parties while doing nothing of substance to stop the flow of drugs to the north. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

## #Max

Between March 1st and 6th, a series of raids was carried out in the border region between Ecuador and Colombia by a joint U.S.-Ecuadorian task force. The Pentagon announced it had bombed a staging site belonging to a designated terrorist organization, with the Ecuadorian army acting as boots on the ground. However, local media and later the New York Times reported a different reality: the strike had hit a dairy farm. The reporting documented torture, burned homes, killed livestock, and the bombing of civilian structures. The Grayzone spoke with an eyewitness, Vicente Garrido, the community's vice president, who described what happened.

## #Speaker 1

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share what took place. From the first to the sixth of the month, we experienced military incursions here in the San Martín settlement. During these events, soldiers committed various abuses without ever informing the community why they were acting against us, including burning homes. Throughout those days, we were subjected to violent

operations carried out without prior notice—burning and bombing homes and detaining members of our community. To this day, we have received no response from the government explaining why these actions were carried out against the people living here in the San Martín settlement.

## **#Max**

The government has been presenting its military action as a great success against cartels and armed groups. What's your comment on that?

## **#Speaker 2**

Well, it's something that, as I said, makes no sense because...

## **#Speaker 1**

Well, no. As I've told you, it simply makes no sense. In this case, we've shown you that these weren't camps, as the government claims, but the homes of the peasant farmers who live here. After all, if they really were camps, as the government says, you know perfectly well that an armed group's camp wouldn't be out in plain sight for everyone to see. I mean, really—how could anyone possibly compare a cattle farm to a military camp?

## **#Max**

Under President Daniel Novoa, influenced by Trump's new geopolitical powers, Ecuador is becoming what Colombia was under Álvaro Uribe in the '90s—a U.S. military colony projecting power over strategic areas of the continent. The attack on farmers in San Martín, Ecuador, might not be an isolated incident but part of a broader U.S. counterinsurgency pattern, producing what in other countries have been known as "false positives": civilian targets presented as military victories, like the 163 people killed on boats in the Caribbean. Condemned without a judge. Guilty without real evidence. And presented as a score that fits the narrative—some sort of game we're supposed to be winning. Just look at the numbers. On March 30, 2026, U.S. War Secretary Pete Hegseth outlined a new geopolitical framework he calls the Greater North America Strategy.

## **#Speaker 3**

That is why President Trump has drawn a new strategic map—from Greenland to the Gulf of America, down to the Panama Canal and its surrounding countries. At the Department of War, we call this map the Greater North America. Why? Because every sovereign nation and territory north of the equator, from Greenland to Ecuador and from Alaska to Guyana, is not part of the global south. It's our immediate security perimeter in this great neighborhood we all live in.

## **#Max**

Within this framework, regions like northern Ecuador are no longer distant peripheries but part of the U.S. security perimeter. The area you live in—would you say it's safe or unsafe? What's life like there?

## **#Speaker 1**

Well, as for the area where we live—just imagine. I've been here in this region for nearly 40 years now. We make our living in different ways. Some of us raise livestock, while others focus on agriculture, growing crops like coffee, cocoa, corn, rice, and so on. Basically, everything the land gives us.

## **#Max**

How do you feel about the government of the country you live in resorting to military action against you, instead of actually contacting you and asking questions to learn what they want to know?

## **#Speaker 2**

No, well, just imagine—that's exactly what we want: clarity.

## **#Speaker 1**

What we're asking for is simple—clarity from the government. We want them to sit down and engage in dialogue with the people of San Martin, the community that was directly affected. As I mentioned, many of us have lived here for nearly 40 years, and we've never experienced anything like this from the Ecuadorian armed forces. These kinds of actions—bombings and similar attacks—were things we used to hear about in Colombia during its period of conflict. But here in our country, in Ecuador, we had never experienced anything like this before.

It's only under the current administration that we're seeing these kinds of situations for the first time—specifically, the burning and bombing of homes. The truth is, it's something truly terrifying, and we still can't fully understand why it happened here in our community. The government claims they were bombing camps supposedly used for training or other purposes. But as I've said, this wasn't a one-time incident. If it had been just a single event, maybe it could've been explained as a mistake. However, there were three separate incursions, carried out in three phases—on the 1st, the 3rd, and the 6th.

## **#Max**

What we're witnessing in Ecuador is not a conventional fight against organized crime. It's the application of counterinsurgency tactics—deployed not against an ideological insurgency, but against the civilian population. The stated objective is to fight narco-bands, which also terrorize locals and

have no allegiance to any social goals, only profit for the big fish, whoever they are. In other words, they're using the army to do detective work—or perhaps that's not the real motive. Think about the 163 people killed on boats, with no intelligence behind it, just to serve the political narrative of the Trump administration. Counterinsurgency doctrine has a long and controversial history.

## **#Max**

It was formalized during the colonial wars and later refined by the United States during the Vietnam War, where the objective was not only to defeat armed groups but also to control territory by dominating the population itself.

## **#Speaker 4**

And we've got to work together—not only to help Colombia, but to help our own country.

## **#Max**

The same logic would later shape operations during Plan Colombia, where entire rural regions were treated as suspects under the assumption that civilians could be sympathetic to insurgent movements. But Ecuador is not Vietnam. It is not Colombia in the midst of a civil war. There is no mass ideological alignment between rural communities and narco-trafficking networks. These are not populations mobilized by political doctrine. They are farmers, laborers, families—people trying to survive in regions long abandoned by the state. And yet, the same doctrine is being applied. Instead of building trust, the state treats the population as a threat. Instead of gathering intelligence through cooperation, it imposes force through fear. Please, tell me one by one, if it's not too much trouble.

## **#Speaker 1**

Yes, of course. Let me tell you about it. On the first day, around 9 a.m., I was hunting in the jungle when we heard aircraft flying overhead. While such patrols were common, they had never targeted homes before. Later, community members near the first fires called me: "Don Vicente, did you know the military burned down houses in this sector of San Martin?" I told them I hadn't known and would check with others. If we couldn't get answers, we would organize a delegation the next day to verify the situation ourselves. The next day, we did exactly that.

## **#Speaker 2**

They called me and said, "Don Vicente, are you aware that the military burned down some houses in this sector of San Martin?"

## **#Speaker 1**

Upon arriving, we confirmed that several homes in the upper section had indeed been burned. I reported this to the president of the parish council, explaining that, according to the residents, the military was responsible. He said he would investigate through the governor's office, but to this day we have received no response or explanation from him or any other authority. On the third day, around 2 p.m., the aircraft returned—light planes and bombers.

### **#Speaker 1**

Explosions occurred in the upper section, then another home was attacked. Young men working at a neighbor Miguel's farm were detained and mistreated, according to witnesses. I gathered community members and went to see what was happening. As we approached, we saw smoke and realized another house was being burned. The young men were bound, their heads covered with black plastic bags. When we tried to speak with the officer in charge, they refused and opened fire. One of our companions recorded the incident.

### **#Speaker 5**

In this video, we can see the villagers trying to talk to the military, who fire warning shots to keep them away.

### **#Speaker 5**

The villagers withdraw as the military keep firing.

### **#Max**

In the community's second video, we can see the villagers gathered, watching as the helicopters take the three workers away.

### **#Speaker 5**

That's right.

### **#Speaker 1**

Shortly after, a helicopter arrived and took the young men away. The following day, we traveled to Lago Agrio to ask about their whereabouts. We were told they had been released in the early hours, but we remained skeptical, knowing the military rarely releases detainees easily. Later, we confirmed they had been freed under duress. They were warned never to return to Ecuador or they would be killed. Disoriented, with their heads still covered, they had no idea where they were.

### **#Speaker 1**

On March 6, the Air Force returned to the same location. A neighbor was ordered to take cover before a bombing run. We organized again to approach, but soldiers forced the neighbor to call us and warn us not to come closer. We heard the explosion from about 400 meters away.

### **#Speaker 1**

The homes had already been burned, leaving only the structural remains and some machinery. If we had known, we would have tried to salvage what we could. Aircraft kept circling for hours, preventing anyone from getting close.

### **#Speaker 2**

To this day, there has been no dialogue with the military or the government explaining why they carried out these attacks against our community.

### **#Max**

Well, I have a few questions, if you don't mind. The workers you mentioned who were detained, tortured, then released and threatened—were they Colombian?

### **#Speaker 1**

Yes, Colombians. They're all Colombians—workers from there, from the farm.

### **#Max**

Oh, so they saw they were Colombian and assumed they were criminals—took them and tortured them.

### **#Speaker 1**

I don't know why they took them. Maybe it was because they were Colombians. But could it be? I believe they surely realized he had nothing to do with it—that's why they let him go. I imagine that if they had known, or even suspected, he was involved in some way, well, I imagine they'd still be holding him right now, right? That's the only thing I can tell you, because that's exactly what happened.

### **#Max**

And you're saying those workers who were tortured and then released were threatened with death?

### **#Speaker 1**

That's exactly what they said—that they were told they'd be set free as long as they left and were never seen in Ecuador again. That explains why they're afraid to come here and give statements to the media outlets that have arrived. Honestly, we've been experiencing continuous flyovers in this area. It's true we haven't heard them over the last two days, but before that, from the incident up until yesterday, they were flying overhead day and night. As I said, since yesterday they haven't been heard. Why would I lie to you?

## **#Max**

In this vacuum, where institutions fail and the state recedes, new forms of leadership emerge—not from official channels, but from within the community itself. Figures like Don Vicente, local leaders who step in to fill the void left behind—organizing, documenting, speaking out. It's to them that people turn when something happens. It's through them that information circulates. And it's often through them that the outside world learns the truth. But this role comes at a cost, because in environments shaped by fear and militarization, those who speak out become visible. And those who become visible... often become targets. Do you feel that the state has brought a resolution to this matter? Do you think this matter is concluded? Or do you think there's more to come?

## **#Speaker 1**

Well, the thing is, the last time they showed up, they said they were going to come back for me because I'd made this complaint public.

## **#Speaker 1**

That's exactly what they told the neighbor at the last place they raided, you know? That was the story they used when they left—telling him they'd singled me out by name. They said, "We're coming back for this guy, Mr. So-and-so, because he filed a public complaint."

## **#Max**

So you've been threatened by the military for speaking out and asking questions—which, in a way, is your job, because you're the community's vice president. You were elected by the community precisely for these kinds of matters, when they need someone to find out what's going on or, you know, try to communicate with someone else—which is exactly what you did.

## **#Speaker 1**

Yes, that's exactly right. Naturally, since the community appointed me as their authority figure, it fell to me, in one way or another, to try to make sense—politically speaking—of these abuses we're enduring. Even as a resident, I believe I would have tried to speak with them anyway, because it simply defies logic. It makes no sense to come in and burn down people's homes. In our specific

case—and I don't think I've ever heard of anything like this happening anywhere else in the country during my lifetime—we're witnessing something unprecedented.

## **#Speaker 2**

That this kind of abuse has happened, like...

## **#Speaker 1**

First they arrive and burn your home, then they come back and bomb it. In short, a series of actions like that. For us, this is something entirely new—something we've never experienced before, as I've mentioned. I've been in this area for well over 30 years. I'm approaching 40 now, and this is the very first time we've faced this kind of abuse. As a result, it's left us feeling traumatized. Honestly, I still can't fully understand it because, as I've said, there's been absolutely no outreach from the government to explain it—to tell us, "This was done for this reason or that reason." In the end, you just hope to receive some kind of explanation. But no, there's still nothing coming from the government.

## **#Max**

This reveals a deeper contradiction at the heart of the current security strategy. While organized crime has clearly infiltrated state institutions—reaching into the police, the military, and political structures up to the highest levels—the force of the state is not directed upward, toward those networks of power. It's directed downward, toward communities already weakened by a decade of austerity. The crackdown targets regions where the state has failed to provide even the most basic services—lacking infrastructure, policing, or basic intelligence capabilities.

In these desolate places, the state doesn't exist as a guarantor of rights or security—it exists only in moments of violence. I'd just like to recommend a bit of caution. This is a very serious situation. These are dangerous people who aren't really trying to find out what happened or to solve a crime, per se. They're just trying to get results for their masters, and they won't stop at anything to do that.

## **#Speaker 2**

Yes, of course. We all understand that here, but—

## **#Speaker 1**

Oh yes, we all know that here. We even end up talking about it among the local community. And where are we supposed to go? Because wherever we go, we'll be branded just the same, even if we cross to the other side of the border. At least in my case, let me tell you, I'd have to leave for another country. And I don't want to just abandon my belongings here—things I've spent so many

years of suffering to build up. Just imagine having to walk away from everything in an instant and start from scratch somewhere else. It's hard because I've already been through that once before, and now it feels like I'm about to relive that life all over again. Honestly, I really don't want to go through that again. That's what several of my companions are saying too. We've decided not to keep this to ourselves, but to make it public—to let the world know.

As I said before, if my time comes—if I'm destined to die someday—then so be it. Let it be God's will. Ultimately, it's in God's hands. Let Him decide what becomes of our lives. But the one thing we must do, the right thing to do, is to make the global public aware of the situation we're enduring under this government. They show no respect for the population. They don't treat us as human beings. Instead, they just roll in and attack the people, then turn around and try to justify it by claiming that those they detained or attacked were terrorists or something like that. But the truth is something else entirely. We are not terrorists. As I've said, whenever I have the opportunity to speak out, I will step forward and speak. I will tell the truth, because that's the decision we've made.

## **#Max**

International concern has not been absent. The United Nations has issued reprimands. Organizations like Human Rights Watch have raised alarms. Even major outlets such as the New York Times have questioned the narrative surrounding these operations. And yet, the political trajectory remains unchanged. The Ecuadorian government continues to align itself closely with U.S. security interests, even as migration policies have led to detention, deportation, and the dehumanization of thousands of Ecuadorians abroad—many of whom are still inside detention camps. In fact, days after the incident, Cristi Noem, one of the very architects of that policy, was rewarded with a medal by President Novoa. There is a bitter irony in this alignment: a government presiding over the displacement and suffering of its own people at home, while embracing policies that strip those same people of dignity beyond its borders.

In that sense, the relationship is not merely cooperative—it's structural, a projection of power that flows from the center outward, with little regard for those at the margins. Well, my observation is that the standard protocol in a situation kind of similar to this would be for the state to, you know, start investigating—whether it's civil servants or even police or detectives, you know. There has to be some sort of preliminary investigation into what's going on in the area. And many times that's because the state has a presence there. It has social workers, police, hospitals, even schools. In the area where you live, are there any services? Is there a police station where you live? No.

## **#Speaker 1**

No, not here. As I was telling you, the thing is, well, you won't find one even in the slightly larger towns—places like Barranca or Santa Rosa, for instance. I haven't seen a police post anywhere around here. It seems that police stations are now located only in the really big towns, places like Jambalí, Lago Agrio, and so on, or in places that qualify as large, organized municipalities. I mean,

out here, we're just farmers. We simply live our lives, each of us on our own farm, each on our own plot of land.

## **#Max**

So, how many hours away are you from the nearest police station?

## **#Speaker 1**

Well, in this case, we're talking about roughly two and a half to three hours to Lago Agrio.

## **#Max**

This is not simply a security crisis but a political one—an asymmetrical war. It's not a war between equal forces, but a dynamic in which, instead of receiving protection and benefits from the state, including due process, people are treated with suspicion by doctrine, and the full weight of the state is deployed against populations with no meaningful capacity to defend themselves. Communities like San Martin have no institutional backing, no effective political representation, no independent structures capable of holding power accountable.

At the same time, the concentration of authority within the executive branch raises further questions, because while the state exercises overwhelming force in rural territories, numerous allegations of corruption and criminal networks at the highest level, including the president, remain uninvestigated. This imbalance is difficult to ignore. It suggests a system in which accountability is selective and power increasingly centralized. I think I have an important question for you. You live on the border, and it's a very porous and dangerous one, next to Colombia. How do you all feel? How do you fare? Do you have to deal with criminal bands? Are you threatened sometimes? Do you see any kind of illegal activity going on?

## **#Speaker 2**

No, I don't. What can I say? Look, to be honest and speak the truth—because, as the saying goes, one must stand by the truth...

## **#Speaker 1**

So, let me put it this way—to be honest and speak the truth, because, well, as the saying goes, the truth is worth dying for, right? But speaking truthfully, it stands to reason that we're situated right here, right on the doorstep of a country where coca is cultivated, where people make their living from that crop. I believe the whole world knows this. It's not just Colombia; as I understand it, Peru

and Bolivia also depend on coca, on coca cultivation. So it would be completely illogical for someone to say, "No, I know nothing about this. I have no idea about any of that." I mean, that's just the reality of things. However—and this is a very distinct point—

## **#Speaker 1**

That does not justify what the government is doing to us. We're right here, just a few steps from the border, in the zone adjacent to Colombia. You could say we're standing firm and facing it all head-on, facing every danger. But that still doesn't justify the government treating us this way simply because of where we live. Absolutely not. Because if that were the justification, then they'd have to crack down on all of Ecuador. They've found cocaine in banana boxes, not here.

## **#Speaker 2**

Where do you come from?

## **#Max**

Normally, there should be built-up trust between the state and the community, and between the community associations as well. After all, they're symbiotic—they need each other. But what we see here is different. Instead of trying to reach out to the community leaders, the representatives, and the inhabitants of the area, they're under attack—a military attack that, as you mentioned, they're not necessarily informed about or even aware of. So there's not much trust being built there, and that trust is essential to make the area safe. How do you feel about this specific issue, this question of trust that should exist between the state and the community?

## **#Speaker 2**

I mean, just as you said, that's absolutely true.

## **#Speaker 1**

At least from my own experience, when I lived for a time back in my home region—my birthplace in Los Ríos—the police there actually tried to engage with the public, to establish a dialogue and build rapport, to foster trust, so to speak. They even created a unit called the Community Police. I'm not sure if it's still operational today, but years ago it was definitely up and running. That was how you would interact with the community officer. In other words, that was the police's objective: to reach out to the citizenry, to the residents of the neighborhoods, in an effort to cultivate mutual trust. It was a process that involved participation from both sides, you see. But here... well, you don't see that at all. As I mentioned, all we witness here are abuses of authority—just arbitrary actions. "I'm taking you in simply because I can," with absolutely no justification whatsoever.

## **#Speaker 2**

This is the paradox of the current strategy.

## **#Max**

In the name of security, the state weakens the very relationships that make security possible. In the name of fighting crime, it alienates the populations whose cooperation is essential to confronting crime. And in the absence of trust, legitimacy begins to erode, leaving behind not stability but a deeper, more enduring form of insecurity. As we were closing this report, we received a message from the people of San Martin—an SOS denouncing the extreme distress and danger facing their community as indiscriminate military operations continue in the area. To them, the risk of becoming a false positive in this war is becoming increasingly real.