

Peru: Brutality in Bagua

Friday 4 June 2010, by [NIBL](#) (Date first published: 17 June 2007).

Curfews, roadblocks, teargas and rumours of dead bodies being dumped in rivers. It feels as though Peru has slipped through a time warp to the tumultuous 1980s and early 1990s, when the Government was embroiled in a civil war with leftist guerrillas, and civilians were caught in the crossfire.

In today's Brave New World, however, Peru's terrorist groups have been largely wiped out and the Government has opened fire on its own citizens: indigenous groups from the Amazon who are struggling to save their fragile rainforest from destruction.

The conflict has been brewing for more than a year, since President Alan Garcia issued special decrees to benefit oil, mining and gas companies operating in the fragile Amazon ecosystem. The decrees were part of a series of laws to fulfil the requirements of Peru's free trade agreements with the US and Canada and make it easier for foreign companies to buy indigenous and communal land. Human rights groups say the laws violate international conventions that require consultation with indigenous peoples before laws are passed affecting their territory.

Amazonian states have been holding strikes and roadblocks since last year to protest the decrees. This 5 June the conflict escalated into brutal violence when the Government sent a special force of police commandos to break-up a peaceful roadblock at 'Devil's Curve' in Bagua, Peru's northern Amazon.

The official government version claims that protesters began shooting at the officers and the police responded in self-defence. Eyewitness reports, however, say the indigenous protesters were armed only with sticks and spears, whereas the police had automatic rifles, helicopters and teargas. The result was one of the most unequal battles in Peru since Spanish conquistadores outfitted with armor, horses and rifles trampled Inca warriors carrying slingshots.

When the noxious clouds of gas had settled, 24 police officers were dead and 100 civilians were missing. Only 10 dead civilians have been found, but local journalists reported that police were dumping bodies into the river and there are rumours of mass graves. The respected human rights organization Survival International has classified the massacre as 'Peru's Tiananmen Square.'

President Garcia moved swiftly to present the police commandos as hapless victims and the indigenous protesters as bloodthirsty assassins. Government television ads showed only the dead officers, and this Saturday Peru's ombudsman's office held a conference with the foreign media to try and convince us that only nine indigenous protesters had been killed. (Later in the afternoon the Government raised the number of civilian dead to 10 when an injured Aguaruna died in hospital.)

President Garcia, a master of Orwellian wordplay, has accused the protesters of committing 'police genocide'. Clearly the President needs a lesson in linguistics: the police deaths were tragic, but the term 'genocide' refers to the deliberate extermination of cultural and racial groups. Special police commando units, armed with automatic weapons, are neither a cultural nor a racial group and they are certainly in no danger of extinction in Peru.

President Garcia is not new to cover-ups - numerous massacres occurred during his first term as president from 1985 to 1990. During Peru's 20-year civil war with leftist guerillas, more than 60,000

Peruvians - mainly impoverished peasants - were killed or disappeared, and yet the mainstream media largely ignored these abuses. When I mention the findings of Peru's Truth Commission to North Americans and Europeans, apart from a few specialists, the majority are surprised. Everyone has heard of Pinochet's atrocities, where an estimated 3,000 were killed or disappeared, but few outside Peru know of the country's dirty past.

Times have changed since Garcia's first mandate, however; gone are the days when strong-armed presidents could murder entire villages and hide the dead. In today's image-strewn, high-tech world, even indigenous protesters in remote jungle regions have access to cellphones and internet. Video images were uploaded to YouTube and other internet sites the same day the Bagua massacre occurred and received thousands of hits. Photos of dead protesters censored by the Government were emailed across Peru and around the world, and even found their way into some mainstream newspapers. (Belgian volunteers working in Bagua circulated shocking photos of dead civilians that contradicted the government's initial claims that only the police suffered casualties: <http://catapa.be/en/north-peru-killings>).

Rather than admitting its mistake, the Government has responded by trying to censor independent media. One of the leading voices of opposition on the ground, 'The Voice of Bagua' radio station, had its licence cancelled after covering the 5 June massacre.

But the Government hasn't been able to stop the information flow. Peruvian human rights organization Aprodeh has confirmed 61 missing persons, 133 detained persons and 189 injured - and the numbers continue to rise.

This Monday evening one of Peru's most popular talk show hosts and comedians, Beto Ortiz, broadcast a message to President Garcia from an Awajón-Wampi woman. 'Our only weapons are spears and sticks,' she said. 'But you exterminated us using armed weapons, bullets and helicopters.' With angry tears in her eyes she continued: 'You sell our natural resources: gold, petroleum and water. You contaminate our environment and leave us poorer than we are now.'

The Government's attempt to satanize Peru's Amazonian peoples backfired spectacularly. Last week thousands of normally apolitical Peruvians across the country took to the streets to protest the Government's actions and support indigenous groups.

On 11 June an estimated 20,000 people gathered outside the Congress in Lima, Peru's capital city, and in smaller provincial centres people turned out in their thousands. Groups in Peru's central Amazon have joined the strike declared by their northern cousins and set up road blockades.

In Cuzco, the mountain province where I live, peasant farming groups have declared an 'indefinite' strike until the situation in the Amazon is resolved, and all major roads and highways are blocked. The mainstream media has concentrated on the bloodbath in Bagua - and while it's true that the massacre is the worst political violence the country has seen in a decade, what's even more surprising is the overwhelming public outcry and solidarity with Amazonian peoples.

Peru's normally apathetic civil society has reacted to the Bagua massacre with voices raised in a united chorus of anger. And I'm not just talking about the usual leftist agitators. During a march in Cuzco last week I saw the women who sell fruit and vegetables at the local market, schoolteachers, students, artists, taxi drivers and even many of my own friends who normally shy away from political demonstrations. Banners covered the stone walls of Cuzco's historic main square, scrawled with angry messages to the Government and words of support for indigenous peoples. Many called for President Garcia to step down from office.

The international response has been equally supportive. A petition to the Peruvian Government

calling for an end to the violence and respect for indigenous rights has already been signed by over 200,000 people (www.avaaz.org). Protests and rallies have been held in front of Peruvian embassies in North America and Europe, and articles have flooded the international media. Even the Globe and Mail, Canada's conservative newspaper, published an editorial last Friday criticizing President Garcia. The paper said Garcia 'cannot be permitted to get away with his glib dismissal of Indian protesters in Peru's Amazon region as "terrorists",' and added that the President's decrees need to be 'scrapped'.

The outcry forced the Government last week to suspend two of the controversial decrees for 90 days. But indigenous leaders were not satisfied with the suspension and maintained their blockades. Desperate to end the conflict and clean up his image, President Garcia has announced a project to scrap the two laws and bring indigenous leaders to the negotiating table. The Government is expected to present the project to Congress later today (Wednesday 17 June).

Daysi Zapata Fasabi, vice-president of AIDASEP, Peru's largest Amazonian organization, says indigenous people want to see real actions from the Government, instead of more promises. 'Why did so many people have to die for the Government to realize their laws were wrong?' she asked the press.

Despite wariness towards the Government, late Tuesday night AIDASEP called on its members to lift their blockades and suspend all 'measures of force' to make way for negotiations. Top of their list of demands is an end to the state of emergency and curfew imposed on Amazonian states, and a truth commission to investigate the Bagua massacre.

AIDASEP also called on the Government to throw out the charges laid against indigenous leaders. Alberto Pizango, AIDASEP's leader and an inspirational force for Peru's Amazonian people, was charged with various crimes, including kidnapping and extortion. Last week Pizango sought refuge in the Nicaraguan embassy after the Peruvian Government labelled him Public Enemy No 1 and launched an unprecedented hunt for the indigenous leader.

Peru's Attorney General, Oswaldo Bautista, is pressing charges against 43 indigenous protesters in connection with the police deaths in Bagua, but has taken no action against police officers responsible for civilian deaths. When reporters pointed out this contradiction, Bautista responded blithely that he was waiting for autopsy results, and admitted that the Government hadn't even launched an investigation into the civilian deaths.

The Government says it will guarantee indigenous people 12 million hectares (46,300 square miles) of rainforest. But even if President Garcia keeps his word, the indigenous reserve land represents only about 20 per cent of Peru's Amazon, meaning the rest - about 55 million hectares - would be up for sale. Already about 70 per cent of Peru's Amazon is under concession to oil, mining and gas companies.

'The jungle is our mother, our pharmacy, our supermarket, our home,' said indigenous leader Salomón Awanash Wajush in Peru's La Republica newspaper. 'The forest gives us medicine and shelter, and that's why we consider it our mother.'

It's a shame that it has taken at least 34 deaths for the world to hear the wise voices from Peru's Amazon. Let's hope that this time we learn from them.

Petition urging Peru's government to end the violence:

www.avaaz.org/en/peru_stop_violence/98.php?cl_taf_sign=6336b618377ae70892816995edd21880

Links for more information in English:

<http://amazonwatch.org/peru-action-alert.php>

http://amazonwatch.org/newsroom/view_news.php?id=1829

<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/06/05/peru-clashes-break-out-in-the-amazon-region/>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8086595.stm>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/06/world/americas/06peru.html?ref=global-home>

<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/06/05/peru.indigenous.clash/index.html>

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