

Peruvian villagers face murder and intimidation from land traffickers

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Invaders continue to seize land within the Chaparrí ecological reserve, one of Peru's most biodiverse forests

Shortly after sunset, along an isolated stretch of highway leading out of a dusty hamlet in northern [Peru](#), a band of five weary farmers clad in reflective neon vests and armed with traditional whips made of bull penises set out on a solemn march.

The Ronderos – self-governing peasant patrols – are resuming their nightly rounds five months after the [brutal killing of their lieutenant governor](#), Napoléon Tarrillo Astonitas.

“During all the years I’ve lived here, the situation has never been this threatening. The murder of the lieutenant governor in this hamlet made us organise in order to protect ourselves,” says Humberto Gonzales Núñez, head of Rondas Campesinas of El Mirador.

El Mirador and the surrounding hamlets remain deeply shaken by the murder last December, living in terror as invaders continue to seize their land within the Chaparrí ecological reserve, one of Peru’s most biodiverse forests.

Defender José Napoleón Tarrillo Astonitas (from his Facebook page). Photograph: Handout

“This hurts so much –my husband was my only family,” Flor Vallejos, Tarrillo’s widow, says. “He was a lovely person. He liked to defend our environment, our lands, and our dry forest. The animals, he loved them.”

Land invaders turned their attention to Chaparrí six years ago when plans to build La Montería reservoir dangled the promise of water resources in a desert-like environment – raising the possibility of agricultural expansion in the protected area.

To date, 28 individuals opposing the plans have been threatened, and last year [10 cases of suspicious forest fires were reported](#) in Chaparrí. According to the head of Peru’s supreme court, Duberlí Rodríguez, more than 1,000 hectares of the area have been affected by land grabbers – deforested, burned and illegally cultivated.

The location of La Montería reservoir has been a controversial matter, since it is within the borders of the protected area, going against a [resolution made by the environment ministry in 2011](#).

The head of Peru’s congressional environmental commission, María Elena Foronda, says the reservoir project has not been approved by the authorities governing protected areas, forests and wildlife, nor the environment ministry. “There have simply been acts of corruption,” she adds.

An organised criminal network has its hold on the area, says Mar Pérez Aguilera, coordinator for the

activist group National Coordinator for Human Rights, which is currently helping to keep Vallejos in hiding. She recounts four cases of murder tied to land grabbing in the area so far: that of Tarrillo, and those of three police officers in [Salas two years ago](#).

But the crimes are rarely prosecuted, and the perpetrators seldom face legal consequences. "Impunity is a message of support," says Pérez. "We know that very powerful people are involved in this case, and that is making everything more difficult."

The case of Chaparrí is legally complex. According to Rodríguez, invaders have also infiltrated the community's group of legal representatives known as the Administrative Directive, enabling an influx of nearly 500 new members during the past six years. Many of them do not meet the normal criteria to join the group, he says.

"It is the Administrative Directive itself that is promoting the disappearance of Chaparrí; they are enemies of the reserve," Rodríguez says.

A spectacled bear climbing in tree on a typical misty morning in the dry forest. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Etlevína López Vásquez has been a community member for the majority of her life, and was also one of the founders of Chaparrí, but says she has found herself a target under the new authorities. She says she has been insulted, that her animals have been killed, and that the new members have tried to expel her from the community.

"We have been very dedicated community members, but since the new directive came to power, the expulsions began, conflicts began, our voices were silenced – as if we did not exist," she says.

Tonight, López hears familiar voices among the barks of dogs while the Ronderos pass her hut. Halfway up the road the men all stiffen and throw each other anxious looks as headlights of an approaching car are spotted. Blowing on plastic whistles, they flank the vehicle as it slows to pull over. There is a sudden, collective sigh of relief – this time they know the driver, and wave him on.

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