

'Shining Path': Terrorism in Peru

By Larry Herzog

"Sendero Luminoso." Shining Path. This visionary title belongs to a ruthless terrorist organization that killed 277 people in one May week, and has quickly become a household phrase in Peru, South America's fifth largest nation.

Once unknown, this small band of rebels operating from isolated camps in the rugged southern Andes mountains, came out of obscurity and brought the capital city of Lima to its knees, no small feat to a city of 5 million residents, the political and financial nucleus of this important U.S. ally. In a brash climax to a month of barbarous activities, the Shining Path group set off a string of bombs near the U.S. Embassy, the Sheraton Hotel complex, and several banks. In a well-timed assault, terrorists also dynamited one of the largest chemical plants in Peru, and caused blackouts throughout Lima. Forced to respond, President Fernando Belaunde Terry declared a 60-day state of emergency, suspending the constitutional rights of all citizens.

These developments in Peru cannot entirely be ignored by strategists of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. While the Reagan administration continues to come under fire for its aggressive Central American interventionist doctrine, South America may be regarded as the next territory in which U.S. interests will be challenged. Currently, there are severe economic crises in both Argentina and Chile, with rumors of a possible coup in the latter. And now Peru, a friend of the U.S. since civilian government returned to power in 1980, after 12 years of military rule, may be headed toward even more troubled times.

If our concerns do indeed shift toward Peru and other South American countries, the architects of U.S. foreign policy would do well to carefully consider our options in this region. One lesson we seem to have forgotten or ignored in Central America is that political turmoil and unrest cannot be divorced from the unique cultures and fabric of these societies. In Peru, for example, labeling the Shining Path group "leftist" is misleading, for although it proclaims itself Maoist, it has been rejected by every important left-wing political party in Peru, as well as the powerful leftist labor unions. The Shining Path movement may, in fact, be a path to nowhere.

The real tension in Peruvian society springs from a deeper source — an historic separation of the brutal poverty of the backward Indian peasant (campesino) society in the Andes from the modernized, European way of life in the coastal cities. The Peruvian peasant who subsists on small plots of farmland in the highland valleys and centuries-old Inca terraces of the Andes is among the poorest of all South Americans. Nearly 7

million of these people suffer from malnutrition. Only 6 per cent have potable water and a scant 1 per cent have plumbing facilities, according to the last census.

Sadly, it is the Peruvian campesino whose historic roots reflect the grandeur of pre-Hispanic Indian civilizations that define much of Peru's rich culture. Today, daily life for them is austere and difficult. In the Andes, the sun rises over fields that yield corn and potatoes, as they did for five centuries for the Inca ancestors of these people. Llama herdsman drive their pack animals over the stone roads built by engineers of the Inca empire. Indian women strain under the burden of heavily loaded shawls, strapping grain and potatoes to their backs so they may be transported to market-town fairs. It is a constant land where the struggle to survive is tradition. Terrorism will come and go as do the earthquakes and the floods.

Yet terrorism has finally arrived on the scene in the coastal cities, amidst the plush suburbs, superhighways, beach resorts, and modern skyscrapers. With three-fourths of all Peruvian industry and banking facilities located in Lima, it is no wonder that the bombings in the nation's social and economic nerve center were a shock. Now that the activities of Shining Path are no longer restricted to distant peasant communities in the high sierra, anxious murmurs may even be heard in the cafes and posh restaurants of downtown Miraflores, Lima's thriving commercial center for the wealthy.

Getting rid of Shining Path's band of terrorists may ultimately not be enough to ease social tension in Peru. The persistence of starvation, infant mortality, deprivation and relentless poverty for one layer of society, isolated in its traditional Andean setting, or crowded into sprawling shantytowns that continue to stretch around Lima and other coastal cities, must be resolved through programs of economic development and social recovery.

These programs need to be efficiently administered, so that the well-being generated reaches the Indian population that needs it the most, and not the privileged classes that too often are the beneficiaries of development projects. U.S. foreign policy might well concentrate on bolstering these aid projects with greater technical assistance, management and financial backing.

For to ignore the deeper cause of social tension in this Andean nation, as in El Salvador, is to allow the seeds for genuine revolutionary turmoil to germinate.

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