

# Peruvian massacre aimed at opening Amazon to transnationals

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A massacre carried out by heavily armed Peruvian security forces against protesting Amazon Indians left dozens dead, as the government of President Alan Garcia attempts to open up the region to exploitation by the transnational corporations.

The killing began in the early morning hours last Friday in the Peruvian city of Bagua, located 1,400 kilometers north of Lima, when some 600 militarized police attacked 1,000 demonstrators who were blocking the main road.

Leaders of indigenous groups have put the number of civilians killed at over 40, while 23 members of the Peruvian security forces have been reported killed. Hundreds of civilians were wounded. The attack ignited popular anger, leading to groups of indigenous people taking 38 policemen and one civilian as hostages at a Petroperu gas station. It was reported Saturday that nine of these policemen died in a rescue operation.

The roadblock was part of a 56-day protest involving tens of thousands of indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon jungle territory (about half of the Peruvian land mass). The action was part of a struggle waged by the people who live in the region to overturn new laws designed to open up communal lands for oil exploration, logging, mining and large-scale farming.

European, American and Brazilian companies are bidding tens of billions of dollars for rights to drill for oil, construct a hydroelectric plant and exploit the vast mineral and timber resources of the Amazon jungle.

The death toll resulting from this confrontation is the highest in Peru since the 20-year-long war against the Maoist guerrilla group Shining Path ended more than 10 years ago. The repressive actions by the police and armed forces will only intensify the already substantial mass opposition to President Garcia, whose approval ratings have fallen to barely 30 percent. The killings have revived memories of Garcia's ordering the massacre of hundreds Shining Path detainees held in the El Frontón, Lurigancho and Los Molinos prisons during his first presidency (1985-1990).

Among the dead in the assault that began on Friday were at least three children. Doctor Edgar Rodas of the Good Samaritan Hospital in Bagua Grande called the police action "barbaric," reporting that children were also among the wounded—including a four-year-old girl. He said that the medical facility had been overwhelmed by the number of casualties.

The reports by the *BBC* and *New York Times* tend to rely on official government accounts, which blame the indigenous associations' leaders, even suggesting that are being instigated by the left-nationalist governments of Venezuela and Bolivia. In a statement Sunday, Garcia spoke of an international "conspiracy" against Peru, and accused the massacred demonstrators of "subversive aggression and terrorism."

The Peruvian daily *La Republica* provides a very different account of how events unfolded:

"At six in the morning, three MI-17 helicopters from the Special Forces of the National Police flew over the area firing tear gases at the protesters. Simultaneously, a large police contingent armed with AKM rifles attacked

by land.

"In a few minutes, the road was filled with dead bodies and the wounded, whom their brothers were attempting to revive in the middle of the police attack.

"As soon as the news of the massacre reached Bagua-Chica, the nearest city, the population rebelled. Outraged groups set fire to the APRA (the ruling party) headquarters and buildings belonging to the government agencies, Cofopri, Pronaa, and to the legislature.

"The population of Bagua-Grande mobilized to defend the victims, but was stopped by heavily armed police contingents. The police did not allow them to give water and first aid to the victims."

The presence of a government representative only increased the anger of the local population. "From helicopters," the *La Republica* report continues, "the police fired tear gas and live ammunition. The population panicked and started running, taking with them some of the wounded."

By midday, the road was re-opened to traffic. The protests continued in Bagua-Grande and Bagua-Chica, where the population fought back throwing stones. On Sunday, the Peruvian government had imposed a 3 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew, enforced by the army.

Among the dead were leaders of the Awajun indigenous community, Felipe Sabio and Mateo Inti. Initially, the well-known leader of the Aguarunas, Santiago Manuin Valera, who had received the Spanish Reina Sofia prize for his defense of nature and human rights, was also reported killed, sparking renewed anger among the local population. It was later reported, however, that Manuin Valera had survived surgery after being shot at least eight times, but remained in critical condition.

Zebelio Kayap, president of the Frontier Communities of the Cenepa Organization (Odecofroc in Spanish), told *La Republica*, "Some of the natives' bodies may have been burned by the police and thrown into the Marañón River." Eyewitnesses reported seeing bodies placed in black plastic bags, loaded into helicopters and dumped in the river in an effort to cover up the scale of the massacre.

The indigenous people began their protest in early April. They claim their ancestral rights to the jungle were not considered in the proposed deals with major capitalist interests and that the government did not consult them. In his typical arrogance, President Garcia responded by saying that he did not have to consult anyone because, according to the Constitution, the state owns all the mineral and hydrocarbon wealth of Peru.

In a statement to the press at the end of last month, Garcia denounced the opposition among the indigenous people of the Amazon to opening up their lands for exploitation as "retrograde, backward and wrong," adding that those who were protesting "haven't even read" the legislation.

"What is happening is that there are people who hate investment, who don't like capitalists because they think that it is always North American Yankees who come, but there are Korean, Arab, Japanese capitalists who are coming to look for petroleum so that Peru will cease being an importer of petroleum," Garcia said.

Throughout the nearly three-month-long protest, the indigenous groups have developed a high degree of coordination and effectiveness.

The protests were led by the Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana (Aidesep—The Inter-ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Jungle). “We represent 1,350 communities, the equivalent of 600,000 Amazon Indians, and we ask the government to consider 25 million hectares (62 million acres) as ancestral territory,” protest leader Alberto Pizango recently told AFP.

After the violent confrontation Friday, Garcia’s government issued an arrest order against Aidesep’s leader Alberto Pizango, who went into hiding, and whose whereabouts remain unknown.

The protesters quickly won national support from workers, peasants and other indigenous organizations. Demonstrations and strikes were planned in their defense. In Iquitos, the largest Peruvian city on the shores of the Amazon River, the police suppressed a march in support of the indigenous people.

The Machiguenga, the indigenous people of the jungle regions of southeastern Peru, blocked the train to Macchu Picchu, Peru’s main tourist attraction.

The militant teachers union, SUTEP, gave its support and raised the need to fight against the government’s economic plan, which has been directed against the interests of Peruvian working people.

Demonstrations were organized in Puno, a major city on the shores of Lake Titicaca, located in the southernmost region of Peru near the Bolivian border.

In the central Andes, a 24-hour strike was called in the city of Ayacucho. In the 1980s and 1990s, Ayacucho was at the center of the war between the armed forces and Shining Path.

In a letter to Prime Minister Yehude Simon Friday, on the eve of the massacre, the Regional Indigenous Federation Awajun of Alto Mayo (FERIAAM) wrote: “The murder of our brothers is being carried out in a premeditated form as you try to distort the reasons for our struggle. The police, armed with weapons of war and backed by the army, have acted against indigenous people with spears, and at this moment, persecution is being unleashed against indigenous leaders.”

The letter continued: “Your offers made to our federation in the meetings in Lima as well as your willingness to carry out a dialogue have all proven to be false. All of the dialogue announced to the newspapers has only served to deceive the Peruvian people, when your intention to defend the Free Trade Agreement and the laws designed to sell our territories to the four transnationals is the only thing that matters to you.”

The high number of policemen killed shows that the situation quickly turned into an angry, full-blown rebellion of the local population against the Peruvian government. The ferocity of the response took President Alan Garcia and his Prime Minister Simon by surprise. How else can one explain the high number of casualties among policemen armed with modern weaponry, whose throats had been slashed by local residents armed with spears?

A chronology of events over the past two months strongly suggests that the government had no intentions of listening to indigenous leaders, embarking instead on a meticulous plan to deceive and distract them as it prepared for a bloody confrontation.

By mid-May, Prime Minister Simon was saying that the leader of Aidesep, Pizango, did not want dialog and instead was looking for a violent solution. The record, though, suggests that it was the government that was preparing to use violence.

- On April 20, an agreement was signed between the government and the indigenous leaders to open a dialogue aimed at reaching a solution to their concerns.

- On May 8, a 60-day state of emergency was declared in response to the blocking of roads, as well as airports and bridges.

- On May 17, an order was issued to the armed forces to provide

support to the national police for a 30-day period.

- On June 3 the police succeeded in putting down a protest by 200 Machiguengan Indians, who had taken over an oil-pipeline in Cusco. The success of this operation might have led the government to expect the same results in its attempt to clear the roadblock in Bagua.

- On June 4, APRA congressmen successfully maneuvered to block a debate on repealing Legislative Decree 1090, the so-called “Forest and Wildlife Law,” which tears down legal barriers to the exploitation of the Peruvian jungle. They did so by arriving at Congress early in the morning, gaining a quorum and voting to postpone the debate before members of the opposition parties had arrived or while they were absent preparing their speeches.

Simon issued a shameful and dishonest statement that APRA’s maneuver to block discussion was part of the democratic process. He also announced that he was prepared to personally go to the protesters to discuss with them, bypassing the indigenous leaderships. It was clear that he and the government were ready to take repressive measures, especially after Pizango had issued the call for a mass demonstration on June 11.

Simon (who was accused of supporting the MRTA guerrillas and jailed in the 1990s) was brought in to replace Alberto del Castillo as prime minister in August 2008. At the time, President Garcia was facing growing mass opposition, especially from the combative miners, and he desperately needed a left cover to continue advancing his right-wing agenda.

In less than a year, Simon has shown his allegiance to his corrupt president and foreign capital by first attempting to deceive the Peruvian people and then ordering the assault on the indigenous protesters blocking the road to Bagua. He is as responsible as President Garcia, if not more so, for the deaths of civilians and policemen.

The Garcia government’s rush to carry out a bloody attack on the Amazon Indians is driven by the need to open up the jungle to foreign capital, a central aim of the Free Trade Agreement he recently signed with the United States. There are billion of dollars at stake.

Indeed, even as the massacre was taking place, a delegation of US energy, mining, communications and other executives, headed by Walter Bastian, the undersecretary of commerce for the Western Hemisphere, was in Lima discussing investments. As the killing continued in the Amazon, Bastian proclaimed the emergence of a “New Peru,” hailing the country for its “political and judicial stability.”

The Garcia government’s claims to represent “progress” and the social interests of Peruvians in the face of the supposed “savagery” and backwardness of the indigenous population are beneath contempt. They echo the rationale given for the systematic genocide carried out against these peoples since the Spanish conquistadores.

The opening up of the Peruvian Amazon to the energy conglomerates and other transnationals will benefit only foreign capital and Peru’s oligarchy. Production driven by profit and private ownership will inevitably entail the destruction of the indigenous peoples and the environment, while deepening the impoverishment of the masses and the extreme social inequality that characterize Peruvian society.



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