

Peruvian government forced to repeal Amazon free trade decrees

Luis Arce
23 June 2009

In the face of a mass protest movement led by the indigenous people living in the Amazon basin, the government of President Alan García and the Peruvian parliament overturned two decrees aimed at opening the vast natural resources of the Amazon jungle to exploitation. The repeal of the measures represents a severe blow to the Free Trade Agreement signed between Peru and the United States.

The daily *La República* reports, “The president admitted that he was mistaken for having excluded the indigenous people when drafting the laws, and that the lack of dialogue provoked the death of 34 people, among natives and policemen.”

Government figures claim that 24 police and 10 natives were killed in the confrontation. Hospitals and religious organizations in the area, however, have reported a far higher civilian death toll, and eyewitnesses told of police burning the bodies of slain protesters and placing them in black bags and dumping them in the river.

There is not one iota of sincerity in García’s words. Throughout the nine-week conflict that led to the massacre of Bagua, [see “Peru: Massive protests against García government over Amazon massacre”], García had repeatedly made arrogant and aggressive declarations disregarding the natives’ rights, while saying he “did not have to consult with anyone,” and that his government would not “give in to blackmail.”

García had to bow to the demands of the indigenous people when it became clear that his government had lost control over the Amazon territory, and the repression it had unleashed had sparked nationwide outrage and mass protests by Peruvian working people that threatened the stability of his government.

The struggle in the Amazon basin had also received international support, particularly from indigenous groups in other Latin American countries. According to the news agency *EFE*, Mexican Indians threatened to occupy the Peruvian embassy in their country, “if the massacre against the indigenous people continues.”

“Various organizations of the indigenous peoples,” the *EFE* report continues, “today submitted at the headquarters of the United Nations in Mexico a letter which demanded a ‘halt to the genocide in Peru’ and for the rights of its peoples to be respected.”

“The organizers of the protest called upon UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to create an international commission to review what is happening in Peru,” *EFE* reported.

Mario de Jesús Pascual, of the Mazahua Council in the Almoloya region of Juárez, recalled that Peru had ratified in 1993 Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), which calls for the protection of “the social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices” of the indigenous peoples.

Exposing the lies of President García, Pascual added that the convention specified that “the Peruvian government must consult with the indigenous people when it wants to exploit the natural resources that are in the territories that they inhabit.”

Encouraged by the hundreds of thousands of workers and students that joined them in a nationwide day of protest June 11, as well as the growing international support from Mexico, as well as native organizations from neighboring Ecuador and Bolivia, indigenous organizations had stepped up their protest, taking control of major roads used to carry produce from the jungle to the coastal cities, including the capital, Lima.

At checkpoints, the natives, armed with spears, decided which trucks could pass and which not. With the majority of Peruvians blaming the government for the massacre of Bagua, the police were in no position to intervene.

Under these conditions, the use of force would have provoked a nationwide conflict that could potentially have brought down the government.

The US government was also forced to retreat from its initial position of intransigently backing the use of force. Prior to the massacre of Bagua, Washington was indicating to Peruvian officials that if Lima failed to enforce the decrees opening up the Amazon region to exploitation, the US would consider annulling the Free Trade Agreement.

At a ceremony last week in which the US delivered \$4.4 million of arms and equipment to the Peruvian armed forces, the American ambassador, Michael McKinley, said that now Washington “will support the dialogue between the Peruvian government and the Amazon natives.”

In his message to the nation June 17, President García said the conflict in Bagua “was the sum of mistakes and exaggerations in which the only loser was Peru.” This is more of García’s lies.

New evidence just published in the Peruvian press strongly suggests that the Bagua massacre was no mistake, but an act of violence designed to crush an opposition that had become intolerable for the government as it was getting in the way of implementing the Free Trade Agreement in the Amazon basin.

The following interview with Salomón Awanash Wajush, president of the National Amazonian Committee of Struggle of the Indigenous peoples, published by *La República* on June 18, bears this out.

Wajush indicates that the natives were in contact with the head of the police and had agreed to lift the roadblock one day before militarized police units launched their deadly attack.

La República: What were the negotiations like with the police during the days of the strike? We had understood that at all times there

was contact with General Javier Uribe Altamirano of the Peruvian National Police, who had given his word not to use force and to continue talking until reaching an understanding.

Awanash: That is true. We had various conversations in which the Amazon authorities and church officials also participated. Moreover, on the Friday before the attack, we had a peaceful dialogue with General Uribe and reached an agreement that to avoid a confrontation with the truckers we would leave open that day—between two and six in the afternoon—two lanes of the highway.

La República: Is it true, that on Friday, June 5, the day of the attack, you had been set to have a discussion at 10 in the morning?

Awanash: The day before, Thursday the fourth, we met at six in the afternoon with General Uribe. We knew from the radio that there was an order to remove us, and we wanted to collaborate with it. The general told us that he could not give us any more time, that the decision to let us protest was out of his hands, and that if he did so he would risk his position, because he had received the order from his superiors to remove us from the highway.

La República: And what did you decide in the face of this imminent expulsion?

Awanash: We asked the general for a truce to be able to leave the highway. Together with the Bishop of Jaén we asked for a truce until 10 in the morning of Friday the fifth. He accepted this with the condition that the only point on the agenda was to open up the highway and after that he would restore order by force. We asked him what would happen if he received the order before that time, and he said that if he received an order from Lima, he would wait until 10 in the morning, because his people would do nothing without his order, and we trusted his word. But at 5:50 in the morning the police began to appear on the hill at Devil's Curve. It surprised me, and I tried to find General Uribe. I called the general's cell phone, but it did not answer; it was off.

La República: You were prepared to go at 10 in the morning?

Awanash: Yes, that same night we had agreed to withdraw and open up the road. We asked for 10 in the morning to give us time to communicate with the 3,500 brothers that they should get off the highway, to find the way to leave.

La República: Do you think that the government's objective was to eliminate you?

Awanash: Yes. Otherwise we do not understand why they attacked on the hill if what they wanted to do was to free up the highway. This shows that they came to kill.

La República: How did the attack begin?

Awanash: When they saw people appearing on the hill from afar, the comrades went to see who they were and realized that they were police. The attack began on the hill with them firing directly into us. At that moment, two brothers fell dead. When we saw that, we began screaming at them not to shoot, but they continued, and one bullet brought down our brother Santiago (Manuín Valera). Within 10 minutes, the helicopters arrived, two from the police and one from the army. From them they fired tear gas grenades and bullets that killed David Jausito, from the community of the Curve, and Jesús Carlos Timiás, from Uracuá. They fell together, shot down from the helicopter.

The overturn of the Amazon decrees has dealt a serious blow to the economic program of President García, who is now making desperate calls for reconciliation in the name of “saving Peru from the world crisis.”

While he claims his economic program had the support of 80

percent of the population, according to a poll conducted by Universidad Católica, only 18 percent of Peruvians want the economic program to continue, 47 percent want to see reforms, and 30 percent demand radical changes.

Stating that “we are back to square one,” the president did not specify what that meant for the more than \$10 billion in foreign capital already committed to oil exploration in the Amazon basin, the building of a hydroelectric power plant there, and the opening of the jungle to the export of timber.

The economic crisis, can only get worse amid concerns that foreign capital flows may cease, especially now that Peru is losing billions in export dollars due to the collapse of commodity prices on the world market.

Meanwhile, the struggle against poverty and exploitation in Peru shows no signs of abating. The people of Andahuylas, for example, started an indefinite strike in support of the Amazon natives and their demand to overturn the 1064 and 1090 decrees. Now the struggle continues with its own demands, among which are the call for the president and his cabinet to resign. In recent weeks similar, independent struggles emerged in other cities like Chiclayo and Chimbote.

García has attempted to shift blame for the massacre onto his Prime Minister Yehude Simon, who has offered his resignation over his role in the repression. García damned Simon, a former leftist, with faint praise, declaring his “confidence” while adding, “I am a man who believes in good intentions.”

There can be little doubt that the retreat by the García government is of a temporary and tactical nature. The government remains committed to making the exploitation of oil and gas resources in the Amazon the center of its economic policy. Moreover, amid the conciliatory rhetoric toward the indigenous population, García and other officials have continued to allege that the mass upheavals in Peru are the work of “outside forces,” accusing presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia of instigating the popular revolt.

Relations between Lima and La Paz have reached a low point after Peruvian Foreign Minister José Antonio García Belaúnde declared Morales “an enemy of Peru.”

“He (Morales) has been inciting this violence, I have not the slightest doubt,” García Belaúnde told a Peruvian radio station. “If during three years President Morales has done nothing but attack Peru, I can't call him anything else but an enemy.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact