

Peru's President Humala imposes another state of emergency against mine protests

Armando Cruz
10 July 2012

Peru was shaken by protests and violent repression last week, with the country's President Ollanta Humala declaring a "state of emergency" in the northern highlands region of Cajamarca for the second time in two months. The aim of the government is to suppress a powerful movement opposing the Conga mining project. The multi-billion-dollar mining venture threatens irreversible destruction of the area's environment.

Harsh repression unleashed against an indefinite general strike has left a toll of five dead, some 45 wounded and 25 arrested across Cajamarca. The strike had been called by regional leaders, ecological parties and leftist collectives who have led the struggle to call off the project since it was approved in November.

A wave of struggles in Cajamarca and elsewhere in Peru led Humala, who won election on the basis of populist and nationalist rhetoric, to turn sharply to the right, carrying out a cabinet shakeup which brought in more hardline figures and imposing the state of emergency, which coincided with the 32nd day of the general strike in Cajamarca.

Together, with the clashes in Cajamarca, there has been an indefinite strike by teachers in the regions of Cuzco, Apurímac, Abancay and Tacna called by their union, SUTEP. At least 49 people have been wounded in Apurímac in protests and highway blockades that have been carried out simultaneously in all of these regions.

The tragic death toll in Cajamarca is consistent with the chilling threat issued by Humala a few days before the killings, in which he warned against anyone trying to attack or impede the construction of water reservoirs with which the Conga project plans to replace four local lagoons, which are to be completely drained to further the mine's operations.

The government, Humala declared, would defend "the right to private property," and anyone who failed to heed his warning would have to "accept the consequences."

The only one who really decided not to "accept the consequences" for his own actions was the president himself, who in the midst of the confrontations and violence, decided in a cowardly fashion to disappear from public view and relegated the obligation of addressing the nation to his cabinet ministers. At a press conference, his prime minister, Oscar Valdés, a right-wing ex military officer, rejected the call by the Peruvian government's office of the public defender for an "immediate end to the violence." and that the "central and regional governments provide the conditions for a return to dialogue." Valdés arrogantly declared only that the "government will hold a dialogue with those who want a dialogue."

Minister of Justice Juan Jiménez, for his part, justified the detention and brutalization of the ex-Catholic priest, Marco Arana, the leader of the Land and Liberty (Tierra y Libertad) party and one of the most visible leaders of the protest movement in Cajamarca.

The arrest of Arana on July 4—the state of emergency had already been imposed—provoked a wave of indignation on the social networks after the appearance of a video exposing the actions of the security forces.

Arana, who had been doing nothing more than sitting on a bench in the Plaza de Armas holding a small sign reading "Water yes, gold no" was brutally grabbed by 40 heavily armed police. The video shows an unresisting Arana screaming "Don't hit me!" as he is dragged by force toward a waiting car amid the shouts and protests of the people. The last moments of the video show a woman shouting at the police, demanding to know why they have to treat protesters this way. A policeman shouts back, "Because they are f...ing dogs!" This is the psychology of the elements that Humala has armed to the teeth and turned against the Peruvian people.

In the midst of this political kidnapping, Arana was able to send a tweet: "They arrested me, beat me a lot, inside the police station they continued to beat me, punches to

the face, the kidneys, insults.”

Arana was freed the next day thanks to a writ of habeas corpus filed by the National Coordinator of Human Rights, which denounced the Humala government for its authoritarianism. Amnesty International also issued a statement demanding that the state of emergency not be used as a blank check for the security forces to violate human rights.

The reality is that, with the Conga project constituting the biggest foreign investment in the country's history (\$4.8 billion), Humala is clearly counting on the brutal repression of those opposing it to send a message to the multinational corporations that he will implacably defend their interests. It was barely one month ago that a similar crisis erupted in the province of Espinar in Cuzco, where residents also rose up against the pernicious operations of another multinational mining company. That confrontation left three dead, and Humala imposed a state of emergency there as well.

Nonetheless, the repression has only enraged the population of Cajamarca, who are confronting escalating police abuse under conditions of virtual martial law. The support in Cajamarca for canceling the Conga project is overwhelming and is not confined just to that region. For example, on July 5, there was a large march against the project in Lima's upper class Miraflores district, among many other protests that took place during the week.

For the pseudo-left forces that supported Humala in last year's election and promoted illusions in his campaign promises, the whirlwind of violence which has shaken the country over the past week has become a matter of some concern. They feel that the deaths and the repression are ripping the image and reputation of the government to shreds, threatening it with a complete loss of control over the country. They are arguing there is a way out in which they see Humala “accepting” the demands of the people, while at the same time, they are claiming that the lurch to the right by the government is not the fault of the president, but rather his cabinet, and above all his prime minister, the hated ex-officer Óscar Valdez.

Thus, *La Primera*—a publication that serves as a voice for the pseudo-lefts who orbit around the union bureaucracy—published on its front page a photograph of Prime Minister Valdez together with the minister of the interior, Wilver Calle, under the headline “They must go,” without mentioning a word about Humala. *La Primera* has also been promoting the idea that Catholic priests should offer themselves as “mediators” in the Cajamarca conflict.

As to the leaders of the movement in Cajamarca, despite their defiant posture against the government—the regional president Gregorio Santos reached the point of urging that Humala be “driven out” like the ex-president of Ecuador, Lucio Gutierrez—they still maintain illusions that Humala is “inclined” toward dialogue with them.

The same Santos in the weekly “Hildebrandt en sus trece,” published by the left journalist César Hildebrandt, explains that he still sees “possibilities” of getting Humala to change his mind.

During recent weeks, photos and videos have also surfaced showing how the police in Cajamarca are being mobilized not in police cars, but in private vehicles, including a bus on which the logo of Yanacocha (the firm that is carrying out the Conga project) is clearly visible. Roque Benavides, the general manager of Buenaventura (the Peruvian mining firm that administers Yanacocha, together with the giant mining multinational Newmont) and one of the richest men in Peru, in an interview with the daily *La República*, contradicted the latest promises from President Humala that the four lagoons would not be affected. Benavides made it clear that the lagoons will be affected by the project and would be replaced by the reservoirs of water, which would be the first part of the project to be constructed to show the population that, in the words of the president, “water is worth more than gold.”

Nonetheless, reports have emerged that the water in the San Jose reservoir, created by Yanacocha two years ago to supply water to the regional population is practically empty, with barely a drop of water.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact