Nine dead, 107 poisoned in Andean village in Peru

Cesar Uco
16 August 2018

On the evening of August 6, nine people died and 107 were poisoned while attending a funeral in the small rural town of San Jose de Ushua in the province of Paucar del Sara Sara in the southern tip of Peru's Ayacucho department.

At 8 p.m., food was served. In the first two hours, several of the attendees showed symptoms of illness. As it became apparent that it was a case of mass poisoning, those sickened had to be evacuated to the closest town with a hospital. With a population of 177, 60 percent of San Jose de Ushua's residents were affected.

One week after President Martin Vizcarra addressed the nation promising to clean up government corruption and making an appeal for foreign capital to return to Peru, this tragedy in a small impoverished peasant town in the Andes, serves as a reminder of the conditions of extreme poverty confronting millions of Peruvians.

The Ayacucho daily *La Prensa* said the tragedy could have been avoided if the victims had received timely medical attention. The head of the Regional Health Directorate (Diresa), John Tinco Bautista, added that lack of human resources and the inadequate staffing of health facilities is a problem that should be addressed urgently by the Ministry of Health (Minsa).

"The predisposing factors in these nine deaths have been time and mobility. The issue of the human resources gap according to the capacity of the health centers is a difficulty that we still cannot overcome," said Tinco Bautista.

According to *La Prensa*: "That night in the health post of Ushua there was only a nursing technician attending, which is why those affected had to be transferred to the health center of Oyolo and Marcabamba." The sick were transported by the area's only ambulance plus San Jose de Ushua's municipal buses.

Four people died in the first four hours. Some died in San Jose de Ushua, and others "unfortunately died when they were operated on at the Pauza Support Hospital," reported *La Prensa*. Among the dead were one child and two youths aged 23 years.

The Peruvian army sent two helicopters and one airplane to transport the sick to Arequipa—the second largest city in Peru—and the capital, Lima. The health ministry provided medicines and health workers. But by the time the government intervened, it was too late.

Preliminary investigations point to the mass poisoning having resulted from ingesting food contaminated with "organophosphate, organochlorine or heavy metals," according to Tinco Bautista, Ayacucho's regional health director.

Organophosphates are a type of pesticide used to protect crops from plagues, but they are also used to kill rats and mice in homes and especially in restaurants.

Dr. Luis Miranda from the Hipolito Unanue hospital in Lima added: "This [the pesticides] could have come in three forms to the body: skin, inhalation or digestion." For these reasons, health officials ordered all inhabitants to leave town in order to fumigate the area.

Based on the autopsies performed on the nine corpses, Tinco Bautista told *La Jornada*, a local Ayacucho daily, that initial results showed signs of "massive intoxication. … 100 percent of the deceased had nausea, constant vomiting, secretions from the mouth and nose. It was determined that eight of them died of cardiac arrest."

The San Jose de Ushua tragedy is not unique among Peru's small and poor rural towns. In the past seven years, 10 cases of mass poisoning were reported. The

© World Socialist Web Site

majority of these had to do with the poisoning of children's school lunches in poor rural areas in the Andes, like Cajamarca, Ancash, Junin and Cusco, as well as Ucayali in the Amazon basin.

The number of children poisoned in this manner totals more than 1,000. In addition, on October 2012, 378 workers of the agricultural complex Beta—one of the main producers of fresh asparagus, grapes and citrus fruits of Ica—showed severe symptoms of poisoning after inhaling a potent insecticide.

But perhaps one of the most tragic cases occurred 19 year ago. According to *El Comercio*: "19 years ago a total of 60 school children were affected after consuming the school breakfast in the educational institution No. 50794, located in the Cusco province of Paucartambo." Of the 60 children, 24 died.

They consumed cereals prepared for school breakfast, distributed by FONCODES—the Fund for Cooperation for Social Development, a national program of the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS).

In other words, government institutions responsible for feeding the school children are in such a precarious situation that it reached the point of distributing poisonous food that killed elementary school children.

Last Thursday, 200 people marched in the streets of Pauza chanting, "The death of our brothers deserves justice" and "Government lies, we want to see the results." The peaceful march was escorted by a contingent of police, many of them heavily armed, with the sole purpose of intimidating the people.

What happens in the poorest areas of Peru is of no concern to the financial oligarchs and CEOs—minor partners of huge transnational mining corporations.

Ayacucho's contribution to Peru's annual industrial surplus value is 0.35 percent, with the main activities being commerce and agriculture. Statistics for rural activity are also appalling. In 1994, there were 6,000 tractors while 82,000 peasants worked the land without one.

Conditions are harsh. Located at 3,008 meters above sea level, the area's climate is classified as "Polar," dry and cold—meaning, according to the Köppen climate classification, that temperatures do not exceed 10 degrees centigrade throughout the year.

INEI records 221,000 schoolchildren in the department. Only 4.11 percent make it to university. Of these, just 31 percent graduate. Ayacucho also has high level of illiteracy: 17.8 percent, compared to the national average of 6.9 percent.

With respect to health care, INEI statistics for the year 2000 listed just 1,277 health workers; that is one for every 390 inhabitants.

Between 1981 and 1993, the population of Ayacucho dropped by 11,683 inhabitants, as result of the dirty war between the Maoist guerrilla organization Shining Path and the Peruvian Armed Forces. It is estimated that 70,000 people died in the 20-year internal war.

Small peasant towns like San Jose de Ushua found themselves caught in the middle of the conflict. Residents were murdered in cold blood by both sides—the Armed Forces and Shining Path—accused of either treason or informing.

As of Saturday, August 11, while the news of the tragedy fades away from the national media, only eight people had dared to return to San Jose de Ushua. "It is almost a ghost town. Most of the inhabitants are in the district of Pauza and are afraid to return because the causes of the poisoning that left nine dead and dozens affected are still unknown," reported *La Republica.*

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site