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Government and police officials in Peru have alleged that a public educators union and educational centers have been infiltrated by elements of Sendero Luminoso, the guerilla group whose war with the government killed tens of thousands between 1980 and 2000.

The allegation comes just as teacher strikes have caused political trouble for the government, and educators have accused the government of conducting a campaign of defamation against them. Meanwhile, about 250 appeals to release Senderistas in prison entered the Peruvian courts in what the judiciary called a "juridical war."

Accusations against SUTEP, arrests

Anti-terrorist police said the Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores de la Educacion en el Peru (SUTEP) had been infiltrated. In July, violent confrontations broke out in the city of Ayacucho, leaving more than 30 injured and several public buildings partially burned by mobs. Teachers there were protesting for better salaries. Unionists set themselves apart from the Ayacucho violence and said the union was not involved with Sendero Luminoso.

SUTEP secretary-general Nilver Lopez said, "The indefinite strike in Ayacucho does not obey nor is it in the national interest of our union." Lopez insisted that infiltrators from the government of President Alejandro Toledo had provoked the violence.

In September, anti-terrorist police said they were on the alert for a "neo-Senderista" threat from infiltration into educational centers and the national teaching profession. Interior Minister Javier Reategui said, "Sendero Luminoso continues to act, and we are prepared to block them before eventual terrorist attacks." He said that the group was using university centers as sites of "subversive ideological penetration," but then claimed that subversive violence "is almost totally controlled and reduced."

Police captured 17 presumed guerrillas, among them eight teachers, in an operation in five cities between Sept. 17 and Sept. 24. "The teaching profession has been infiltrated by terrorism, and we are working to dismantle that organization," said Reategui in a television interview. Among the detained were two directors of state schools.

Unionists allege government defamation campaign

Union leaders accused the government of conducting a defamation campaign to lower public opinion of them. Lopez said the arrests were "a smokescreen and witch hunt." "There is a will on
the part of the government to seek to prejudice public opinion against SUTEP and make it look like we're covering up terrorists and Senderistas," said former SUTEP head Olmedo Auris. "We have always said and we now insist that these violent tendencies have to be fundamentally defeated ideologically and politically, and in that respect our position is very clear."

Lima newspaper La Republica said "police intelligence sources" said they were carrying out operations throughout the country to detain 357 teachers with links to terrorism. Government officials loudly denounced what they alleged were violent plans for a general strike in early July (see NotiSur, 2004-07-23), alleging Senderista elements were mixing with the protestors.

Protests have forced the unpopular President Toledo to declare a state of emergency twice and have threatened governability in Peru (see NotiSur, 2003-06-06, 2003-12-12).

Police say that three Sendero columns of about seventy people each are currently operating within Peru. About 1,700 members of the guerrilla group are jailed in different prisons around the country. "Guerra juridica" starts with 250 habeas corpus motions Sendero Luminoso began a "juridical war" by presenting 250 habeas corpus motions to the Peruvian courts on Sept. 20, said spokespeople for the judiciary.

Lawyers for the Senderistas, jailed on charges of terrorism, presented the motions for the release of militants held in the Miguel Castro Castro and Chorrillos prisons, among others, and for the release of top Sendero leader Abimael Guzman, who has been jailed for 12 years at the Naval Base in Callao, east of Lima.

In the motions, the Senderistas do not question new anti-terrorist legislation that the government has laid down, but they protest that the length of their detentions has been excessive since they have been held without being sentenced, and they should therefore be released. The judiciary and the Peruvian Congress discarded the possibility that the 250 Sendero Luminoso militants would be freed en masse.

Pablo Talavera, president of the Sala Nacional para casos de Terrorismo, said judges had rejected the majority of the motions and said they were geared toward taking the prisoners' cases to international tribunals. "Their strategy is clearly defined, they seek to arrive at the Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH), but before doing so, they have to exhaust internal means," said Talavera. He said almost 100 legal motions were sent to his office and declared inadmissible.

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