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Police Kill Three Protestors in Peru

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Peruvian police killed three protestors when coca-growing campesinos took over the central hydroelectric plant in the town of San Gaban to protest US-backed eradication of their crops. The clash also left four police officers and several more civilians wounded and led the federal government to declare a month-long state of emergency in the region. This is the latest incidence of violence in the southern department of Puno, where a mayor and his subordinates fell victim to a mob attack earlier this year in the town of Ilave (see NotiSur, 2004-05-07).

The incident led Interior Minister Fernando Rospigliosi to step down when the Congress censured him for responding inadequately to protests in the region before they got out of hand. Javier Reategui replaced him and now is being forced to explain renewed turbulence in Puno to Congress.

**Peru declares emergency in violent zone**

Police fired on coca growers protesting government eradication of their cocaine-producing crop Oct. 19, killing two of the campesinos after they attacked a police station near the southern border with Bolivia, authorities said. A third later died of wounds sustained during the clash. The confrontation occurred in San Gaban, 725 km southeast of the capital, after nearly 800 demonstrators seized a local electric plant and then tried to take over the police station, said an Interior Ministry statement. Later statements said there were 2,000 demonstrators.

Prime Minister Carlos Ferrero said a 30-day state of emergency had been declared and that police reinforcements were being flown hourly into the area in groups of 50. "We don't want to become a narcotics state," he said. "We are defending the people." A state of emergency suspends basic constitutional rights such as freedom of assembly, permits authorities to enter homes without search warrants, and authorizes the president to charge the armed forces with maintaining order.

Authorities had recently found a 2995-hectare swath of coca in the area and launched operations to destroy the crops and dismantle 10 outdoor labs where the leaf was chemically processed into cocaine paste. "Eighty-five police were forced to use tear gas and then, because the mob was overrunning them, to fire shots to prevent the police station from being sacked and weapons stolen," killing two of the protesters, the Interior Ministry said. Six other growers and four police were injured in violent confrontations, the statement added.

San Gaban Mayor Adolfo Huamantica told CPN radio the violence was sparked by the government reneging on a promise to send a commission to evaluate the situation regarding the coca crops. The growers were demanding an "immediate stop" to eradication efforts and wanted "direct talks," Huamantica said, adding that a decision to send police reinforcements to San Gaban "could bring regrettable consequences." Peruvian coca growers frequently protest attempts to deter the crop's
production, arguing that coca leaves are part of Andean culture and have been used for centuries in ceremonies or chewed to ward off hunger.

Political movements have built up to defend coca farming in both Peru and Bolivia. The Peruvian and US governments maintain that the vast majority of the coca leaf is processed into cocaine. Peru's government permits the cultivation of about 10,000 hectares of the plant for chewing and for sale to companies that produce pharmaceutical cocaine, package coca tea, or make extracts used in soft drinks.

Peru was once the world's leading producer of coca, but the country slashed its production by 70% between 1995 and 2001, thanks to low coca prices, interdiction, forced eradication of coca fields, and programs to help farmers grow alternative crops.

Congress called on Interior Minister Reategui to explain events in San Gaban the day after they occurred. He said police acted in self-defense when they killed the three coca farmers in a group that hurled rocks and tried to burn a police lieutenant alive. Reategui made his comments as police regained control of a hydroelectric plant seized by hundreds of coca farmers in San Gaban. He said government negotiators would go to the area next week to meet with the farmers. Reategui alleged the farmers were incited by cocaine traffickers. One police officer was knocked unconscious by a rock, another was beaten with clubs, and a third was soaked with kerosene in an attempt to set him afire, Reategui said.

**Town where mayor lynched peacefully elects replacement**

Also in the department of Puno, the residents of Ilave elected a new mayor on Oct. 18, choosing a replacement for the late Cirilio Robles. Robles died in April when a mob of local residents beat him to death for corruption. The Defensoria del Pueblo and civil organization Transparencia said the electoral process unfolded "normally" and "in a peaceful manner" both in Ilave and in 186 other mayoral races and 689 aldermen races around the country. In those votes, called "revocatory," the population had to indicate whether they were satisfied with the municipal authorities they had elected the year before. At least 24 mayors and 101 aldermen were removed.

The vote in Ilave, capital of the province of Collao, which is composed of 211 Aymara communities living in 28 population centers, went without incident and with high voter turnout. The city, near the Bolivian border, had 44,327 voters choosing between 11 municipal candidates.

With 50% of the votes counted, authorities announced that Miguel Angel Flores of the Fuerza Democratica had 31% of the votes, while Somos Peru had 19.4%, the Frente Popular Agricola del Peru 10.5%, and several others coming in at less than 10%.

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