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New Rebel Group Creates Hostage Crisis

by LADB Staff
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An armed nationalist group, the Movimiento Etnocacerista (ME), seized international attention when it took control of a remote Peruvian police station in the town of Andahuaylas, about 440 km southeast of Lima in the department of Apurimac, demanding the resignation of President Alejandro Toledo and the establishment of an order based on the Incan Empire.

Six people, four policemen and two ME members, died in the incident, and 14 were wounded. Hostages were held for four days, from New Year's Day to Jan. 4, before a surrender was negotiated. Congressional condemnation of the incident led to the resignation of Interior Minister Javier Reategui, the second interior minister forced to resign after violent incidents in less than a year.

"Etnocaceristas" seize captives

The leader of the armed nationalist group that seized a remote Peruvian police station and took officers and soldiers hostage surrendered to authorities Jan. 4, but about 125 of his followers remained barricaded inside with their captives. The government negotiated a surrender of the remaining rebels shortly afterward. The leader, former army Maj. Antauro Humala, and his supporters stormed the police station in Andahuaylas during a New Year's Eve party, set up a perimeter around the station, and demanded the resignation of President Toledo.

Humala turned himself in to National Police Chief Felix Murazzo at the town's municipal building before dawn Jan. 4. His followers were believed to be responsible for ambushing police reinforcements as they crossed a bridge Jan. 1, killing four officers. The group said it lost two members to government sharpshooters. Humala's group, which wants to establish a nationalist indigenous movement modeled on the ancient Incan Empire, demanded Toledo's resignation and accused him of selling out Peru to business interests in Chile, a historic rival. They called themselves etnocaceristas, taking their name from the ex-president of Peru, Andres A. Caceres (1886-1890, 1894), who was a hero of the war with Chile (1879-1883).

In October 2000, brothers Antauro and Ollanta Humala led 50 followers in a short-lived military uprising a month before the collapse of former President Alberto Fujimori's corruption-ridden, 10-year regime (1990-2000). The revolt failed to spark the wider rebellion the brothers had hoped for.

The Humala brothers and their followers were granted amnesty in December 2000 by Peru's Congress. Lt. Col. Ollanta Humala was transferred for overseas duty, while Antauro Humala forged a small, but vocal political movement with an extremist message. The group opposes foreign investment and preaches against the European-descended elite that has ruled Peru for hundreds of years.
Ollanta Humala recently was forced to retire from his post as a military attache at the Peruvian Embassy in South Korea. Toledo refused to step down, instead declaring a state of emergency and sending 1,000 troops to the region. Press reports and government officials accused the group of xenophobic and fascist beliefs.

The standoff began Dec. 31 when the group, all apparently ex-soldiers, took over the police station in the Andean town. Ten police officers were taken hostage. A day later, authorities said, the group ambushed a police vehicle in a different part of town, killing four officers and wounding several others. One gunman was fatally wounded in the attack, local media reported.

On Jan. 2 the group captured at least four Peruvian soldiers and was holding them hostage along with the 10 police officers. Humala enjoyed strong local support. Thousands of residents converged on the town square Jan. 2, demanding a peaceful settlement to the standoff. Humala joined them during what he claimed was a three-hour truce agreed to by police. However, shooting broke out on his return to the police station.

Humala told Radioprogramas that government snipers opened fire, killing one of his men and wounding another. Humala claimed a young resident of the town was also killed. He said his men captured some of the sharpshooters.

**Interior Minister forced to resign after incident**

Interior Minister Reategui resigned Jan. 10 during hearings into the standoff with Humala’s paramilitary group. "I am conscious that the political situation is polarized, and that's precisely why I tell you that this morning I presented the president of the republic my irrevocable resignation," Reategui told parliament during an appearance to explain his handling of the incident.

Reategui denied allegations from opposition lawmakers that he had received intelligence reports warning that followers of Antauro Humala would meet in Andahuaylas. Humala and 186 of his followers were being interrogated by authorities in Lima, Reategui said.

Reategui is the second Peruvian interior minister to resign because of violence in southern Peru in less than a year. After residents lynched the mayor of Ilave in the department of Puno in May 2004, Fernando Rospigliosi stepped down as interior minister after Congress passed a censure vote (see NotiSur, 2004-05-07).

Some officials said there were ties between the ME and Sendero Luminoso (SL), the group that waged war against Peru's government in the 1980s and 1990s. The surfacing of Humala's group provoked a debate within Peru regarding the group's similarities to Sendero and the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA).

The ex-president of the Sala Nacional contra el Terrorismo, Marcos Ibazeta, said the ME action was very different from those of Sendero. "It is a typical case of rebellion that had a political end: the
resignation of President Toledo," said Ibazeta. They also acted without hiding their identities, while terrorists act in a clandestine manner, he said.

But former anti-terrorist prosecutor Maria del Pilar Peralta told Lima daily El Comercio that Humala should be charged with terrorism. Humala demanded that he be recognized as a prisoner of war. He faces a potential 20-year sentence if convicted on charges of rebellion.

Paper alleges that Venezuelan government funded rebel group Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his followers allegedly gave US$100,000 to the ME, according to an investigation by the Peruvian newspaper El Comercio into the funding of the group managed by the Humala brothers.

The newspaper said that "the Peruvian Interior Ministry views as reliable the information that states that in 2001 Hugo Chavez sent Antauro Humala Tasso, through a retired army officer, the amount of US$100,000 to consolidate the political party." Intelligence sources said there were not additional deliveries because Humala "did not properly use" the money.

Based on the investigation by El Comercio, the ultranationalist movement often receives money from foreign parties, particularly from Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia.

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