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Peruvian Campesino Protets Against U.S. Trade Agreement Turn Fatal

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Campesino protests in Peru resulted in at least four deaths and hundreds of arrests in February as agrarian groups called for the government of President Alan Garcia to mitigate the effects of the recently passed free-trade agreement (FTA) with the US.

Peruvian farmers calling for state subsidies, lower prices for fertilizers, and a halt to bank seizures of farms clashed with police, leading the government to declare a state of emergency in eight coastal departments.

Garcia's Interior Minister Luis Alva Castro testified before Congress that the Policia Nacional de Peru (PNP) were responsible for the deaths, and he rejected opposition demands that he resign. The protests overshadowed the meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum then underway and led the Peruvian government to strike the city of Cuzco from the list of APEC "subseats," or cities designated as meeting sites for the group.

Violence in Cuzco, Ayacucho

The cities of Cuzco and Ayacucho were particularly notable sites of turbulence during the February campesino strikes, with key tourism sites undergoing blockades. The government declared a state of emergency on Feb. 19 after the protests ended in at least four deaths and more than 700 under arrest.

The government granted the armed forces control of the departments of Lima, Ancash, and La Libertad in a bid to free about 1,000 stranded buses after protesters battled police and blocked roads and railway lines, Cabinet Chief Jorge del Castillo said that day. "The state can't remain impassive faced with this situation," he told reporters in Lima. "These measures are severe but absolutely necessary to safeguard order in the country." Campesinos called the nationwide protest to push for greater state subsidies as part of the US-Peru Trade Promotion Agreement (PTPA), the FTA with the US (see NotiSur, 2007-10-19 and 2008-01-11).

Unions called for an indefinite strike on agrarian debt, compensations for expected losses from the PTPA, and water-use issues. The Bloomberg financial news service reported that Peru, the world's largest exporter of organic coffee, asparagus, and paprika, boosted agricultural exports to the US and China by 10% in 2007 to US$2 billion.

"The agreements we've reached don't establish amounts or deadlines," said Enrique Malaga, president of the Junta Nacional de Usuarios de los Distritos de Riego del Peru (National Irrigation District Users' Board, JNUDRP), which organized the protest. "The government has lost all credibility."
Protesters in the southern Andean region blocked the railway line to the Inca citadel of Macchu Pichu, Peru's biggest tourism attraction, on Feb. 18, forcing the suspension of the service, Orient Express Hotels Inc. unit Peru Rail said. Thousands of passengers were stranded around the country without food or water, as shown in footage broadcast by Lima television station Canal N. Edinburgh-based photographer Martin O'Donnell said his wife and 4-year-old son had been caught in the southern Andean desert of Majes for 48 hours. "You don't expect to be put in this situation," O'Donnell said in a telephone interview from Scotland. "My family is stuck in the desert, and we haven't heard anything from the government."

One protester was killed in a shootout with bus passengers on the north coast, and three others died during fighting with police in the southern Andean area, Lima-based Radioprogramas reported. The protests would not cut off food supplies to Lima, Peru's capital, as the coastal Pan-American Highway and central Andean highway were open, Agriculture Minister Ismael Benavides told reporters in Lima. The JNDRP suspended the strike for seven days on Feb. 20, reported Peruvian newspaper La Republica. They had maintained the strike for more than a week, but called on campesinos to return to work for a week so the group might reach an agreement with the government.

Leaders had called for a peaceful strike, but Spanish news service EFE said vandals and criminals took advantage of the thousands of blockaded travelers by attacking and robbing them. The Garcia government takes a dim view of protests that could harm the country's lucrative tourism industry and called the demonstrations "blackmail" against the country. "It is one thing to protest, to strike, but no one has the right to destroy and blackmail," said Garcia. "It is time to say enough, it is not possible that highways be blockaded or there be threats of destroying public roads."

Garcia claimed that there might be guerrillas from the Sendero Luminoso group or "foreign elements" involved in the strikes. He defended Interior Minister Alva Castro, who is responsible for the national police and domestic security, against calls for his resignation. "All those who are coming out to agitate live off of state salaries, those are the ones who should resign," said Garcia.

Members of the party of opposition politician Ollanta Humala criticized Castro and the PNP for the deaths in the protests, while members of the party of Keiko Fujimori daughter of jailed ex-President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) called for greater government action against "terrorism." Del Castillo said the chaos along the highways was a "consequence of the irresponsibility of the agrarian labor leaders."

The agrarian strike came a few months after a five-day national mining strike in November 2007, which ended after the Congress made progress on legislation to improve pensions, profit-sharing, and rights for subcontracted workers. Government removes Cuzco from APEC cities The declaration of a state of emergency on Feb. 18 overshadowed the inauguration of the first preparatory meeting of the APEC forum, which will meet in a plenary session in Lima in November. More than 1,200 high officials from the 21 nations that form APEC congregated from Feb. 20 to March 2 to debate and outline the agenda for the November summit. The state of emergency and the
blockade of the Pan-American Highway in the context of the strike created certain doubts about security in Peru. The government punished Cuzco for the violence and allegedly illegal marches on Feb. 27, saying it would not be one of the APEC forum subseats. The Garcia administration said the marches violated laws promoting investment in tourism.

Defense Minister Antero Flores Araoz announced the action, saying, "By the decision of its own citizens, Cuzco has renounced being an APEC subseat with the many acts of violence." The Peruvian press noted Flores Araoz's sarcasm when he said, "They decided with their violent actions that Cuzco should not be [a subseat]. Very good....It won't be done, you don't want it to be in Cuzco, it won't be in Cuzco. They decided it themselves."

Cuzco's regional president Hugo Gonzales Sayan called on the central government to reconsider. Asked about the possibility of successive conflicts potentially bringing turbulence to the APEC meeting, Vice President Luis Giampietri said he did not anticipate that occurring, although he admitted that "what would be ideal is that none of that occur." He said Peru had made a great effort "to convert this meeting into a historic accomplishment for the country."

Giampietri said the Peruvian economy "was transitioning to a modernization without precedents with a record in external trade and a boom in foreign investment." He told the APEC delegates, "You will be witnesses to how Peru is reaching the level of the majority of economies in APEC and allowing us to give better economic circumstances to the population."

**Peruvian troubles with inflation**

Like most Latin American economies, Peru is struggling with inflation rates. February inflation was going to be higher than expected because of a limited supply of fruits and vegetables from the north coast, said Roberto Flores, an analyst at Lima-based brokerage SAB Centura. "Distribution problems might worsen in coming days, provoking a temporary increase in some products' prices," Flores wrote in a report Feb. 19. "Blocked roads will also affect agroexporting companies, as their products will face difficulties in arriving at the Callao port."

Peru's sol rose 0.1% to 2.8987 per US$1.00 in mid-February, near a nine-year high. The currency had gained 3.3% this year. Garcia's approval rating fell to a three-month low in February as Peruvians reacted to the rising food prices.

Garcia's support dropped to 31% from 32% in January, Lima-based Ipsos Apoyo Opinion y Mercado said Feb. 18. Only about 27% of those surveyed approved of the government, 74% disapproved of Congress, and 73% disapproved of the judiciary. Some 57% of Peruvians surveyed said they would vote for Lima Mayor Luis Castaneda for president in 2011. Other potential candidates receiving support were Humala, Lourdes Flores, Keiko Fujimori, and former President Alejandro Toledo (2000-2005). Apoyo surveyed 1,099 people in 10 cities from Feb. 12 to Feb. 15. The poll's margin of error was plus or minus 3.1%.

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