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Peru Agrees to Museum to Remember Victims of Political Violence

by LADB Staff

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Peruvian President Alan Garcia's initial refusal to accept a donation to construct a Museo de la Memoria that remembers victims of the political violence the country endured between 1980 and 2000 put the issue of reconciliation, which continues to divide Peruvians, at the fore once more. In late February, the media, citing German diplomatic sources, reported that the executive had turned down a US\$2 million donation from the German government to construct and maintain for 10 years a memory museum and information center.

However, after Garcia's decision provoked an impassioned national debate, on March 26 Foreign Relations Minister Jose Antonio Garcia Belaunde said that writer Mario Vargas Llosa had met with Garcia the previous night to point out the benefits of a memory museum for the country, and the president had agreed to its creation. "Sendero Luminoso began this war, but government forces also committed abuses. That is why it's important to have the Museo de la Memoria, so that it doesn't happen again," Vargas Llosa told Lima daily La Republica.

German offer first refused

The German government made the offer in March 2008, when its Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul visited the photography exhibit Yuyanapaq (To Remember, in Quechua) at the Museo de la Nacion in Lima. The exhibit illustrates the violence perpetrated by subversive groups and the regular and irregular government forces that fought them.

Six months after the initial offer, the donation proposal was confirmed within the framework of a cooperation agreement between Peru and Germany signed in the Peruvian capital. La Republica quoted Miguel Guisti, executive secretary of the Instituto de Derechos Humanos of the Universidad Catolica, saying that German Ambassador to Peru Federico Kauffmann communicated the Peruvian executive's rejection of the offer to the German government in Berlin at the end of 2008. Garcia not only turned down constructing a memory museum, but he has repeatedly questioned the final report of the truth commission (Comision de la Verdad y Reconciliacion, CVR), published in August 2003 (see NotiSur, 2003-09-12).

The report was the result of nearly two years of investigation into the political violence lived out in the context of the internal conflict that ravaged the country between 1980 and 2000. For the president, the CVR report was merely an initial attempt to determine what happened in the country. "What interpretation do the armed forces and national police (Policia Nacional del Peru, PNP) give to all this? They should also have one or two spaces to present their interpretation," said Garcia to the local press on March 2, referring to the German government's donation offer. "I believe there are people who have another point of view, hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps millions," said Garcia. "What's important is to pluralistically include the many existing interpretations."

He added, "That money should be invested in the extremely poor communities and given directly to families of victims of terrorist violence." Salomon Lerner, who was CVR president, complained that the government was making counteroffers to a donation offer. He said the rejection disrespects the victims' memory and culture and the reparations that the CVR advised the nation to make.

Reparation: a right

The CVR, which submitted its report to President Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006) in August 2003 after an 18-month investigation, recommended creating a reparation plan (Plan Integral de Reparaciones, PIR) for victims of the violence that left 69,280 people dead or disappeared.

The overall objective of the PIR, created by Congress in July 2005, was, "To repair and compensate for the human rights violations as well as the social, physical and emotional, or material losses or damages suffered by victims as a result of the armed internal conflict." The program is integral, appropriately combining symbolic reparation measures with material reparations, and includes both individual and collective measures. It also provides for creating and drawing up a single victims registry (Registro Unico de Victimas, RUV), which to date has identified 20,808 persons and 4,814 communities affected by the violence.

The RUV is the responsibility of the Consejo de Reparaciones (CR), which, as of January, in coordination with regional and local governments, churches, and civil-society organizations, had set up more than 70 attention centers (modulos de atencion) throughout the country. Prime Minister Yehude Simon, who defended the executive's counterproposal, said that, in contrast with other governments, the Garcia administration has given 108 million soles (US\$35 million) in reparations to victims of the internal violence and has invested 500 million soles (US\$161 million) in social works in the districts ravaged by terrorism.

Nevertheless, human rights organizations and victims associations are warning about the political use of collective reparations and the danger of clientelism in the poorest areas in the country. They point out that the Comision Multisectorial de Alto Nivel (CMAN), responsible for government actions and policies related to peace, has principally focused on collective reparations and is carrying them out in such a way that many mistake them for government social programs Juntos and Crecer.

Sonia Paredes, reparations specialist with the Asociacion por Derechos Humanos (APRODEH), told La Republica on Feb. 24 that "coincidentally" the communities benefitting from the Comision are in the 880 districts of the government's Crecer program to reduce poverty and malnutrition. Thus, reparation loses its identity and "is no longer intended to compensate victims and restore their dignity," said Paredes.

Fighting oblivion to do justice

On March 1, more than 1,000 people, among them Vargas Llosa and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, signed a public letter pointing out that, based on the CVR investigation, "It has become clear that the only way to achieve a just and democratic reconciliation is to comply with victims' rights to truth, justice, and reparations. It is indispensable to fully memorialize the facts and honestly reflect on the past." National human rights advocate (Defensora del Pueblo) Beatriz Merino said on

March 4, "Building a memory museum should not divide Peruvians and should be an opportunity to initiate a sincere process of reconciliation in our country."

Foreign Relations Minister Garcia Belaunde told La Republica on March 10, "The Peruvian government's position is that we don't believe the CVR report has contributed to reconciliation; therefore, we believe this is neither the moment nor the opportunity to create a museum that will keep the wounds open." "Every country that has had an internal conflict has seen the need to precisely record all that happened to avoid committing the same errors again. Unfortunately, what the government has done is deny part of the memory to also deny part of its own past. I believe that is its greatest fear, reminding people of the human rights violations of the [first] APRA [Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana] government," Gloria Cano, a member of APRODEH, told NotiSur.

Cano is also a civil lawyer representing families of victims of the 1992 La Cantuta and 1991 Barrios Altos massacres at the trial of former President Alberto Fujimori (1991-2001) for human rights violations. Cano was referring to massacres in El Fronton prison (see NotiSur, 2003-09-12, 2007-03-16), and in Cayara and Accomarca in the department of Ayacucho, committed during the first Garcia presidency (1985-1990). In 1985, the Army massacred nearly 70 residents of the community of Accomarca when it learned that subversives were in the area. In 1986, state agents extrajudicially executed more than 200 inmates, accused of or sentenced for terrorism, during uprisings in El Fronton, Lurigancho, and Santa Barbara prisons.

In Cayara, the Army is alleged to have extrajudicially executed nearly 30 campesinos in 1988. Since 2005 in Ayacucho, where the CVR estimated that 26,259 people died or disappeared during the internal conflict, the victims group Asociacion Nacional de Familiares de Secuestrados, Detenidos y Desaparecidos de Peru (ANFASEP) has run the memory museum Para Que No Se Repita (So it doesn't happen again).

The museum is at the ANFASEP center and it has on display objects, photographs, works of art, and other pieces that show human rights violations in that Andean city during the 1980s and 1990s. "The Ayacucho museum is maintained with private funds and has been the result of the effort of this group of women, mothers of victims, who to this day continue seeking justice but also preserve the memory of what happened in Ayacucho during those years," said Cano.

Pilar Fierro Huaman, mother of Dora Oyague Fierro, assassinated with eight other students and a professor at the Universidad Nacional de Educacion Enrique Guzman y Valle, called La Cantuta, in 1992 (see NotiSur, 1992-04-06, 1993-06-18, 1993-10-01), attends Fujimori's trial every day.

"My daughter was 21 years old. She had nothing to do with terrorism, neither did the other students. I want justice for my daughter. Any government that murders people is not just. The Museo de la Memoria is important so that no one forgets what happened and so that it doesn't happen again," Fierro Huaman told NotiSur.

On April 1, La Republica reported that Garcia has named a six-member high-level commission to make the museum a reality. The commission will be headed by Vargas Llosa and will include

former CVR president Lerner. Writer Vargas Llosa told La Republica that the photographic exhibit Yuyanapaq would be the focal point of the museum, which will present victims of all sides without favoring any side.

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