Peru's Sendero Luminoso: Still a Threat?

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The capture in Peru of the last member of Sendero Luminoso's Comité Central still at large was characterized as an important setback for the terrorist group; however, the ideological battle against the group has clearly not yet been won.

On Feb. 12, 50-year-old Florindo Eleuterio Flores Hala, known as Artemio, was captured. For the past 28 years, he had dominated the Valle del Alto Huallaga, one of the principal coca-leaf producing areas in Peru's north-central jungle region.

Flores Hala was captured in Cashiyacu, Tocache, in the San Martín region, in a joint police-Army operation following six years of intelligence work. Artemio was wounded, apparently by an informant within his ranks who shot him when he realized that he had been discovered. Five Senderistas took Flores Hala to a small health clinic and then transferred him to a hut where they abandoned him. Police captured one of the terrorists, who during interrogations gave details about where they had left Artemio.

The Dirección contra el Terrorismo (DIRCOTE) blames the Sendero leader for more than 500 terrorist actions and the deaths off 1,000 police, military, and civilians during the past three decades in which he operated in the Huallaga. Attorney General José Antonio Peláez said that Flores Hala is facing life in prison because of the nature of his crimes and for having been a member of Sendero's Comité Central. Artemio will be tried on charges of terrorism, drug trafficking, and felony homicide.

"[Artemio's crimes] are not going to go unpunished and will be sanctioned with the greatest severity," said President Ollanta Humala.

Humala received numerous congratulations for the capture of the Sendero leader, from both national political leaders and former Presidents Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006) and Alan García (1985-1990, 2006-2011), as well as from former presidential candidates Deputy Keiko Fujimori and Pedro Pablo Kuczynsky, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, US Attorney General Eric Holder, US Ambassador to Peru Rose M. Likins, and others.

Toledo said that capturing Artemio alive "demonstrates the moral superiority of our security forces." Fujimori said, "It is a triumph for Peru. We congratulate our armed forces, the Policía Nacional, the Ministries of Interior and Defense, and, of course, President Humala.

Likins said that the US$5 million reward offered by the US government for Artemio's capture will be given to the civilians who contributed to the effort.

Following Artemio's capture, President Humala's popularity rose five points to 59%, according to an Ipsos Apoyo poll published in late February by El Comercio.

The new Senderismo

Humala said that, now that Artemio has been captured, the next target is Víctor "José" Quispe Palomino, who operates in the Valle de los Ríos Apurímac y Ene (VRAE). "We can tell the country
that we are doing the job and fulfilling what we offered the country. The next step has to be the VRAE, and we will continue making progress," said the president.

Sendero Luminoso's top leader Abimael Guzmán, known among his followers as presidente Gonzalo, was captured in 1992 (NotiSur, Sept. 15, 1992) and is serving a life sentence (NotiSur, Oct. 13, 1992). After his capture, Guzmán was convinced that it was impossible to continue with the "people's war."

"The reasoning was very simple: president Gonzalo's leadership was the guarantee of victory for the revolution; with him in prison, the only thing left was to negotiate peace. [Former President] Alberto Fujimori [1990-2000] needed to win the referendum that would legitimize his April 1992 coup. He and his alter ego Vladimiro Montesinos began conversations with Guzmán and, after arduous negotiations, Guzmán recorded a video in which he recognized his defeat, congratulated Fujimori for his victory, and called for signing a peace accord," said historian Nelson Manrique in La República.

At the time, two Sendero tendencies were defined: The "political solution," led by Guzmán, which looked for an agreement with authorities that would include a general amnesty for Sendero prisoners; and the "to proceed" tendency, which opted to continue the armed struggle and which had its major bases in the coca-growing areas of the country, the Valle del Huallaga, led by Artemio, and the VRAE.

In 2003, Artemio changed his position and joined president Gonzalo's tendency. He tried on several occasions to negotiate an amnesty and in subsequent years ended up taking on Gonzalo's slogan, "For a political solution to the problems derived from the war."

Manrique said that Artemio's fall "could dismantle Sendero in the Huallaga, which was counting on ending the war, but it is not going to end the drug-trafficking violence in the region. It could even convert ex-Senderistas into open hired guns for the international bands that operate there."

The historian also says Artemio's fall will not have a major impact on stopping the actions of José and his followers in the VRAE, who have a larger armed force than Artemio's. "The positive thing is that the government will be able to concentrate its resources on just one front," said Manrique.

Former presidential advisor Carlos Tapia said the only thing the two Sendero tendencies have in common is that both involve armed groups that are closely linked to drugs, to drug trafficking, but they have no ideology, they lost it. They are groups at the service of drug trafficking that require armed actions to defend their illegally based economy.

Tapia told La República that he does not believe that Artemio was the last of the historic Sendero leaders. "He never had any importance, so much so that [Sendero] never considered the Huallaga as even a Comité Regional; it was considered a Comité Zonal. That is in the report of the truth commission (NotiSur, Sept. 12, 2003)," said Tapia, who was a member of the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR).

For the security forces, Artemio's fall could ignite José's expansionist desires in the VRAE; he has chalked up three downed helicopters, something Artemio was never able to do.

Five days after the capture of the terrorist head of the Huallaga, a Sendero sharpshooter killed Army Capt. Germán Parra del Carpio with one shot to the head. Since 2008, when the armed forces
entered the valley, Senderistas have killed 60 officers of the Army, which has 29 anti-subversive bases in the area.

"If the state is asleep and does not assume a viable policy regarding drug trafficking and violence, it is likely that tomorrow we will also regret the presence of the Quispe brothers in the Huallaga," warned historian Antonio Zapara in La República. The US government is also offering a US$5 million reward for José’s capture.

President Humala does not consider Sendero Luminoso a threat to the country. It is made up only of armed remnants with a limited capacity that have been creating problems, and now the head and the principal leaders who give it continuity have been eliminated. Humala also said that this case should serve as an example so that new generations reflect on the consequences of terrorism.

"We are governed by the rule of law and in a democracy, and we will use the tools that we have so that [Artemio] does not get away without an exemplary punishment that will show the entire country, especially youth, that the past cannot be forgotten," Humala said.

Those words would seem directed at university and high school students who belong to the Movimiento por Amnistía y Derechos Fundamentales (MOVADEF), the political arm of Sendero Luminoso created in November 2009, which this year tried to register as a political party with the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (JNE). In February, the JNE denied the MOVADEF request because it defends the terrorist group.

The best-known faces of MOVADEF are lawyers Alfredo Crespo Bragayrac and Manuel Fajardo Cavero, who were in charge of Guzmán's defense. Crespo headed the Asociación de Abogados Democráticos, dedicated to the release of terrorists imprisoned in the 1980s and 1990s.

"In our movement, 30% are former prisoners and 70% are youth," Crespo told the magazine Caretas last January.

Article 3 of MOVADEF's bylaws, presented to the JNE, says that the organization is guided by "Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and Gonzalo’s thoughts." Most Peruvians feel that, before MOVADEF tries to register as a political party, it should recognize the crimes Sendero committed and ask for forgiveness.

Tapia says that, after Guzmán's capture, Sendero was defeated politically and militarily but its ideology of destruction and death was never defeated. "The ideological struggle is underestimated because it is assumed that Sendero was defeated. This struggle is the purview of the country's democratic political forces which have to fight back," Tapia said in statements to of El Comercio's magazine Somos.

Rocío Silva Santisteban, executive secretary of the Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDDHH), says there can be no reconciliation in Peru without justice and without memory. The CVR blamed Sendero for more than 30,000 deaths during the 1980-2000 armed conflict.

"What MOVADEF is proposing, as are some military sectors linked to human rights violations, is amnesty as oblivion—without justice for the victims. And for us that is totally inappropriate. A general amnesty means the possibility for human rights violators to continue to enjoy impunity," Silva Santisteban told local media.
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