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Remains of Victims of Peru’s Internal Conflict Returned to Family Members

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The Ministerio Público made a significant contribution earlier this month to the country’s healing process by handing over to family members the remains of 60 people who disappeared in the region of Ayacucho during the armed conflict that ravaged Peru between 1980 and 2000.

Authorities made the handover Aug. 6 in a special ceremony at the Catedral de Huamanga, in Ayacucho’s Plaza de Armas. The event followed years of research by the national prosecutor’s office and the Equipo Forense Especializado de Ayacucho, a local forensics unit. The remains—all pertaining to people who went missing between 1983 and 1993—were exhumed between 2011 and 2013.

"Among the recovered remains are five minors, 35 males, 19 females, and an unborn baby," the public prosecutor’s office indicated. "They were identified using anthropological and ontological methods and DNA tests."

The victims are linked to events that occurred mostly in Ayacucho’s Huanta and Huamanga provinces, in the southern highlands, where murders and forced disappearances were widespread during the conflict between the armed forces and the Sendero Luminoso terrorist group. Sendero Luminoso launched its war against the Peruvian state in May 1980 in the Ayacucho town of Chuschi (NotiSur, Aug. 23, 1988).

The remains were placed in white coffins together with articles of clothing and objects the victims had with them at the moment they were executed.

The religious ceremony, in which Ayacucho Archbishop Salvador Piñeiro and Father Félix Pariona spoke in Quechua, was presided over by top prosecutor Víctor Cubas Villanueva, representing Attorney General Pablo Sánchez Velarde. Also present were Javier Anaya Cárdenas, the president of the Junta de Fiscales Superiores de Ayacucho; Luz del Carmen Ibáñez, a national coordinator with prosecutors specialized in terrorism and human rights cases; and committee members from the Oficina Defensorial de Ayacucho.

The Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos (MINJUS), represented by Adolfo Chávarri Arancibia, the executive secretary of the Comisión Multisectorial de Alto Nivel (CMAN), offered condolences on behalf of the state to the families of the victims. CMAN is a government body tasked with coordinating and implementing the state’s policies and actions regarding peace, collective reparations, and national reconciliation.

Following the ceremony, family members took the coffins to the Huamanga provincial government building, where city and regional authorities, along with civil society representatives, held another memorial service in the presence of loved ones. Participants included former Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) president Diego García Sayán; legislator Marisol Pérez Tello of the Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC); and Ayacucho judicial authorities, among others.
Afterwards, family members took the remains to their various communities of origin to give the victims Christian burials. Cubas Villanueva acknowledged an interest in carrying out future handovers at the burial sites, "to honor the memory of the community that was affected in the given area."

Felimon Salvatierra, president of the Coordinadora Regional de Afectados por la Violencia Política (CORAVIP-Ayacucho), a victims association, backs the idea. Salvatierra was just three years old when his father, whose remains are still unaccounted for, disappeared during the internal armed conflict. He noted that, in the Aug. 6 events, the bereaved had to make the double effort of attending the ceremonies and then transporting the remains to their respective hometowns.

Thousands still missing

Among the people whose remains were handed over that day was Nazario Chimaico Mendoza, 51, journalist Rosario Romaní wrote in the Ayacuchan daily La Calle. Chimaico Mendoza was executed and disappeared in 1984 when a group of approximately 60 Sendero Luminoso members entered his community in the district of Huanta. After 31 years, the man’s remains were finally handed over to his brother, Donato Chimaico Mendoza.

Lucia Oscco Tello, 50, another of the victims honored Aug. 6, was also killed in 1984, in this case by a military self-defense patrol, which burned her house in the Chungui area and then executed her. Her remains were located in the district of La Mar and handed over, 31 years after her death, to Romaldo Castro Oscco, a family member.

The remains of the 60 victims join the 1,644 other bodies that have been handed over to family members since 2002, according to Ministerio Público sources. During that time, authorities have recovered the remains of 3,202 people and identified 1,833, a relatively small number considering that some 16,000 people are presumed to have disappeared during the conflict and been secretly buried in more than 4,500 common graves, Peru’s post-conflict Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR) concluded (NotiSur, Sept. 12, 2003).

More than 40% of the deaths (69,280) and disappearances included in the CVR’s final report, released Aug. 28, 2003, occurred in the Andean department of Ayacucho. The CVR also found that 75% of the conflict’s victims had Quechua or other indigenous languages as their mother tongue (NotiSur, June 20, 2003).

On Aug. 18, authorities from Huancavelica and Ayacucho reported the discovery of five common graves in Oroncoy, in the Chungui district of La Mar province. The gravesites are thought to contain the remains of some 60 people, including men, women, and children. Investigators believe they were killed in January 1985 by anti-terrorism police known as Sinchis.

Demanding help from the state

On July 26, representatives from the Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones de Afectados por la Violencia Política (CONAVIP), the Asociación Nacional de Familiares de Secuestrados, Detenidos y Desaparecidos del Perú (ANFASEP), and the Asociación de Viudas, Madres y Sobrevivientes de Miembros de las Fuerzas Armadas y Policía Nacional (AVISFAIP) sent President Ollanta Humala a formal petition demanding the state take greater action in searching for the bodies of the missing.

The victims groups asked the president specifically to prioritize the Ley de Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas (search for missing persons law), which has been awaiting approval since 2012. The
law promises to streamline the process of seeking, identifying, and recovering the remains of the disappeared. It would allow the Ministerio de Justicia to develop a registry of burial sites and plan the exhumation of remains without affecting ongoing investigations and help the healing process for family members who have waited more than 30 years for answers.

Family members of the missing hoped that President Humala would announce passage of the law during his national address on July 28, Peruvian Independence Day. He did not. But the next day, Justice and Human Rights Minister Gustavo Adrianzén announced that the law would be ready by the end of the year. He said his office is reviewing the bill before presenting it for approval by the Consejo de Ministros.

Critics question the government’s commitment to the initiative. "There isn’t any real political will to tackle this problem that should have been resolved years ago," Gisela Ortiz, head of a group of family members of victims of the 1992 La Cantuta massacre (NotiSur, Jan. 14, 1994), told Diario Uno.

Gloria Cano, director of the Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos (APRODEH), also spoke out on the issue. "The government has delayed the Ley de Búsqueda a lot," she said. "We hope this time it will follow through and approve it, because the families of the missing need to find [the remains of their loved ones] so they can be at peace."

Adrianzén also indicated that the government plans to reopen the Registro Único de Víctimas (RUV) and modify the Ley Integral de Reparaciones so that each family receives an indemnity based on the number of losses they endured. More than 5,100 people lost more than one family member to the armed conflict, according to the registry. "There are people who lost a father, mother, and siblings," the justice minister said. "It’s not fair that they’re recognized as suffering just one loss [as things currently stand]."

On Aug. 1, the president’s office approved some US$1.3 million in reparations to 1,021 people listed by the CMAN as having suffered from the internal violence. "When it comes to reconciliation and inclusion, paying reparations to the victims, even if it’s late, is a step that can’t be ignored," Diego García Sayán wrote in a recent La República opinion piece. "What’s been done up to this point is very little, very late given that the debt to the victims is very substantial and the list of pending reparations for victims of political violence is very long."

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