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School Attacks, Lynching Incidents Signal Growing Crime Problem in Peru

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Citizens in Lima and elsewhere in Peru have grown increasingly concerned about public security, have little faith in law enforcement, and are now taking the government of President Ollanta Humala to task for failing to make crime fighting a top priority.

Between April and June, crime-perception numbers rose 17 percentage points among Lima residents, where 90% now feel unsafe in the streets, according to an Ipsos poll carried out in June for the daily El Comercio. Three of 10 respondents claimed to have been victims of crime within the last year. Of those, nearly 80% were robbed in the streets.

Numbers provided in September by the Ministerio Público suggest that 30% of Lima residents were victims in the past year of theft or robbery, which differ in that the latter involves not just loss of property but also real or threatened violence. The ministry’s Observatorio de Criminalidad (crime observatory) found that, in just the first four months of this year, an average of more than 240 thefts or robberies per day were reported in Metropolitan Lima. Real crime numbers are presumed to be significantly higher considering that more than 90% of such incidents, according to a study by Peru’s Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (based on 2012 numbers), are not reported because of low public confidence in the Policía Nacional del Perú (PNP) and the effectiveness of the judicial system.

Every day, media outlets report on streets muggings and holdups in restaurants, hair salons, casinos, and other businesses with a seemingly prosperous clientele. Added to that are stories from recent months regarding a new kind of crime: the extortion of private schools in peripheral districts of Lima where police presence is minimal. Edgardo Palomino, head of an association of some 700 private schools around Lima, says extortionists demand sums of between US$940 and US$9,400 not to harm students, teachers, or school directors. In some cases, the criminals have attacked schools with gunfire and hand grenades as a means of intimidation.

"First they approach offering you security," Palomino told the daily La República in late May. "If you don’t oblige, threats start to arrive—against you or your family. They don’t stop pressuring with letters, emails, or messages on social networks until they’ve accomplished their objective."

Midday murders

Palomino made his comments shortly after Sabel Evangelista, the director of the María Montessori school in Lima’s San Juan de Lurigancho district, was gunned down by assassins. The May 20 killing took place as Evangelista was leaving the school—the middle of the day and in front of students. The day before, on May 19, in the same district, assassins shot two security guards at another private school, also in front of students and parents. Police reported that, in both cases, the school administrators were victims of extortion.

The following month, unknown assailants threw a hand grenade into the rear courtyard of a school in the same district. The incident took place just as students were getting ready to leave the facility. Fortunately the explosive, inside a manila envelope and covered in masking tape, did not explode.
Data collected in 2014 by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI) found San Juan de Lurigancho and Ate to be most crime-prone districts in Metropolitan Lima. The two areas, according to Instituto de Defensa Legal (IDL), have one police officer for every 1,483 and 2,315 inhabitants, respectively, compared with one for every 272 people in the downtown San Isidro district.

In general, complaints to the PNP regarding extortion cases do not result in arrests. Many school directors, for that reason, prefer to keep quiet. Palomino is of the opinion, however, that the only way to put a stop to these crimes is by reporting them and maintaining a permanent relationship with the police. Currently, the schools where attacks took place are under PNP guard.

Sources within the PNP claim approximately 300 criminal groups involved in extortion schemes operate in Peru. Of those, 280 are in Lima and Callao, mostly in the capital’s Cono Norte sector, San Juan de Lurigancho district, and southern beachside neighborhoods. The sources say that victims reported 387 incidents of extortion in 2013 and 275 last year. This year, despite an apparent increase in such cases, the number of victims reporting the crime is again on the decline, presumably because of fear.

The extortionists have also targeted city governments. In the region of Ancash, criminals have murdered seven mayors. And in some of Lima’s districts, mayors report that they have received threats, demands for payoffs, and, in some cases, demands for strategic city government posts, in the treasury or public-security departments, for example.

**Justice or mob violence?**

The crime wave and law enforcement’s apparent inability to stop it have prompted some people in Lima and elsewhere in the country to take a hands-on approach to the problem with citizen arrests, public beatings, and even, in a few cases, lynchings.

Such actions are being encouraged by a controversial campaign called "Chapa tu choro" (grab your thief), which was launched by journalist Cecilia García Rodríguez, from the central department of Huánuco, and calls on citizens to physically punish captured criminals. The campaign has sparked something of a movement, with affiliated groups suggesting people "Chapa tu choro y déjaloo paralítico" (grab your thief and leave him paralyzed). And in many towns and cities, signs have been put up warning against criminality.

People involved with the campaign have posted numerous videos on Facebook and YouTube showing residents physically punishing criminals (or supposed criminals) before handing them over to police. In one case residents used a large wooden stick to beat a motorcyclist who tried to steal a young woman’s bag. In other cases the excessive violence has even resulted in death. On Sept. 15, a mob in Huánuco burned two alleged criminals alive. Seven months earlier, in Puno, a mob killed a businessman mistakenly identified as a thief.

The amount of popular support the questionable campaign has mustered is worrisome. Approximately 60% of respondents to an Ipsos poll conducted in Lima said they agree with Chapa tu choro. Nearly 47% said they support citizen arrests and teaching criminals a lesson before handing them over to police.
Officials with the Defensoría del Pueblo, when questioned by reporters, said they oppose the campaign and warned that, in the long term, it could prove counterproductive by prompting criminals to respond with their own wave of violence and revenge.

Response from the government

Many Peruvians see President Humala as having failed to fulfill the promise he made upon taking office in 2011, when he said his government would implement policies to wipe out crime. A mid-October Ipsos poll found that, among those who disapprove of Humala, 52% cited public security as their principal reason, while 39% blamed the president’s lack of leadership.

The numbers have put the Humala administration squarely on the defensive. "The crime phenomenon didn’t just sprout up from one day to the next," Interior Minister José Luis Pérez Guadalupe explained in a recent interview with La República. "Crime is part of society, and I think we were all caught a bit off guard by this crime wave, and the issue of the grenades."

Since 2011, the Fuero Policial Militar, Peru’s special justice system for police and military, convicted or has ongoing procedures against 86 officials regarding the theft or loss of 290 grenades, 97 pistols, 22 long-range rifles, and other weapons. The Superintendencia Nacional de Control de Servicios de Seguridad, Armas, Municiones y Explosivos de Uso Civil (SUCAMEC), a government agency that tracks the use among civilians of firearms and explosives, found that, in both 2013 and 2014, Peruvian police seized an average of 16 grenades per day, nearly half of them in Lima.

Peru’s apparent crime spike is taking place despite an 82% increase, under Humala, of the Ministerio del Interior's budget. What, then, should authorities do to counter the trend? Opinions vary. Some public-security experts say it should be up to the country’s mayors to implement preventative measures and make citizens feel safer. Others raise the possibility of turning to the armed forces for help.

Interior Minister Pérez Guadalupe says the military is not prepared to patrol the streets. But Defense Minister Jakke Valakivi has said that, if the police really do need assistance, he would consider assigning members of the armed forces to crime-fighting duties. The idea has also been raised by some of the likely 2016 presidential candidates, including ex-Presidents Alan García (1985-1990, 2006-2011), of the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA), and Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006), of Perú Posible. Others dismiss such suggestions as an irresponsible ploy to win votes.

Pérez Guadalupe proposed that the use of grenades by extortionists be qualified as terrorism and, therefore, punished with life sentences. Detractors were quick to challenge the proposal as being out of step with Peru's anti-terrorism laws. Authorities should take a firm, but legal, approach to crime, they said. The result of the debate was a legislative decree published Sept. 26 in El Peruano, the official government gazette, establishing that extortionists who use children to commit crimes will receive life sentences and that the use of explosives for purposes of extortion will be punishable by between 15 and 25 years in prison.

The day before, the president’s office dispatched a separate legislative decree, number 1213, regulating the use of private security services. Starting in 2016, members of the police will be prohibited from doubling as private security agents, a practice that became commonplace starting 25 years ago, when the government of former President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) established the
24x24 system, whereby police work one day and rest the next. To compensate for their low salaries, police were authorized to work for third parties during their down days.

The Humala administration also issued a norm giving people 90 days to voluntarily relinquish—without fear of punishment—any firearms, munitions, war grenades, or other explosives they have in their possession.

Some analysts say that President Humala’s public-security policies have erred by focusing on quantity—funding new patrol cars, police stations, and weapons handovers—rather than on the quality of PNP agents. César Bazán, a public-security expert with the IDL, says there is an urgent need to reform law enforcement in Peru, starting with the kind of training future police officers receive. Among other things, training ought to place a greater focus, according Bazán, on crime prevention and human rights.

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