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Peru: Notes On Drug Eradication Efforts, Related Guerrilla Activities

by John Neagle

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As a result of guerrilla activity, some 40 US citizens, including Drug Enforcement Administration agents and contract pilots and technicians, were recently forced to abandon the town of Tingo Maria as their main operations base. Team members currently sleep either in Lima or in Huanuco, 50 miles south of Tingo Maria. Every day they fly back to the Upper Huallga Valley to coordinate "search and destroy" missions against coca-processing laboratories and clandestine airports. An estimated 250,000 acres in the valley are planted in coca, farmed by peasant migrants. Two years ago, Sendero Luminoso rebels and the smaller Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement began moving into the region and are now reportedly entrenched. In recent weeks the rebels escalated their attacks on Peruvian police and army units. For instance, an ambush of an army truck on Nov. 22 left 22 soldiers dead. Three police officers were killed and eight wounded when guerrillas attacked a bridge Dec. 19 and 16 officers died in two incidents Jan. 8. On Jan. 9, guerrillas killed four policemen guarding an energy plant on the outskirts of Tingo Maria. Sendero Luminoso is known to be strongly opposed to drug use, but it permits peasant migrants to grow coca, and reportedly intervenes to guarantee that they are paid good prices for coca leaf and paste sold to intermediaries. The US-financed coca eradication program is also perceived to benefit the rebel cause: "imperialists" destroying the peasants' source of income are easy ideological targets. There are reports that some Sendero Luminoso columns receive payment for providing protection of clandestine airstrips. However, rumors that the guerrillas are being supplied with sophisticated weaponry by drug traffickers have not been confirmed. Peruvian police say that all weapons captured from the rebels thus far were captured from soldiers and police killed in clashes with guerrillas. Unnamed experts told Alan Riding of the New York Times that the situation becomes even more confusing because some drug traffickers appear to pose as rebels. In the town of Uchiza, 65 miles north of Tingo Maria, there is also evidence that the army, police, drug traffickers and leftist guerrillas all somehow co-exist. But the "experts" say that guerrillas there are not likely "pure" ones. Supported by helicopters on loan from the US and specially trained Peruvian police, the current anti-drug campaign is aimed at interrupting the chain between production and consumption at the laboratory or shipping stage. A new operations base is being constructed at Santa Lucia, 85 miles north of Tingo Maria. On Jan. 16, the Washington Post reported that the DEA planned to send 25 to 30 armed agents to Peru to step up the campaign. A separate US-financed program involves coca eradication by some 400 contract workers who under the protection of heavily armed police, use gasoline-powered trimmers to cut down coca. Last year, according to government officials, a record 13,008 acres of coca plantations were destroyed via this method. (Basic data from Washington Post, 01/19/89; New York Times, 01/26/89)

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