

Peruvian town whispers in fear of '1,000 eyes'

By Michael L. Smith

The Globe and Mail, March 1983, 20.

Two nurses, off duty from their remote medical posts in the countryside, sit on a park bench on a late Sunday afternoon in Ayacucho's picturesque but run-down main square.

"Ayacucho is sad," one says. "The band no longer plays on Sundays. The campesinos are afraid to come into town for market. There's no happiness, no hope left."

The town of Ayacucho, 350 miles southeast of Lima, has taken on its meaning in Quechua, the language spoken by the Andean Indians: the corner of the dead.

Since early January, the Peruvian army has been patrolling the streets. There is a strict curfew. Everyday, army bulletins are distributed describing clashes with guerrillas, casualties and prisoners. And assassinations have occurred in broad daylight.

In a secluded cafe near the main square a professor from the University of Huamanga whispered: "Don't mention my name or even my department. If you sound as though you know too much in Ayacucho, you become a subversive suspect for the police or a potential stool pigeon for Sendero Luminoso. There are a thousand eyes watching you."

Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) is a small Maoist faction that, after two years of rising violence, has brought the army. Its tactics, combining twentieth-century ideology, arcane Inca methods and latent discontent, forced the Government's hand.

Sendero has for the past 20 years had its stronghold at the University of Ayacucho, where its founder, Abimael Guzman, taught in the education department.

Sendero's cadres are known as dogmatists. "You can't discuss with them. They think they are the only group capable of changing the country," the professor said.

In 1978, Mr. Guzman and most of his political associates disappeared from the university. Two years later, when the Government of President Fernando Belaunde Terry took office, anonymous acts of sabotage began in Ayacucho, neighboring villages and even in Lima.

The Government called the incidents terrorism and passed stiff legislation to discourage it.

Last March, Sendero launched a new offensive by attacking Ayacucho's prison and freeing 300 prisoners. Police posts in isolated towns were assaulted. Police, civilian authorities, money-lenders and merchants were assassinated after so-called people's courts.

The police, undertrained and ill-equipped for this type of confrontation, seemed powerless to stem Sendero's advances and withdrew to the main towns, leaving the countryside open for Sendero to spread its propaganda and recruit, often at gunpoint, among the peasants.

By the end of the year, more than 60 communities around Ayacucho were without telegraphy and telephone communications, and travel by road was risky because guerrillas were stopping buses and trucks to ask for donations.

Many towns have been left without essential supplies, because Sendero prohibited traditional Sunday fairs as part of its plans to set up self-sufficient liberated zones. Communities under the guerrillas' control also had to reduce planting to subsistence levels so that surplus crops could not be sold to besieged Ayacucho.

In late December, Mr. Belaunde gave the subversives, as the Government calls them, 72 hours to lay down their arms. Then he gave complete political and military control of the eight-province region to the armed forces.

The Government estimates that Sendero probably has between 200 and 500 guerrillas and another 3,000 members in the peasant militia, which carries out defensive action against police patrols.

To match these forces, the Government has stationed about 1,500 police and 2,100 troops from the army, marines and air force in the region. Air support includes six helicopters and reconnaissance and transport aircraft to allow greater mobility against Sendero's hit-and-run tactics.

Agustin Haya, a left wing deputy, says the military has confined itself to holding Ayacucho and a few towns, freeing up the police to move out to the country and search out the guerrillas. The army wants to avoid carrying the brunt of the dirty work. It is watching its public image.

However, this approach has turned Ayacucho, with its 70,000 inhabitants, into a garrison town.

Provincial families, worried about the safety and conduct of their daughters, have had to send them off to relatives in Lima and other cities.

Although Ayacucho residents are generally relieved that the army has restored some order in the town, they are still bitterly resentful that the Lima Government has failed to fulfil its promises that more public works and other programs to get at the roots of the discontent.

Special hatred is reserved for the police, all of whom are called Sinchis, after the special anti-subversive unit.

"We have no rights, only duties: the duty to show our ID cards on demand; the duty to tolerate a broken door or a stolen radio in a police raid, the duty to accept detention for up to 30 days if you are fingered as a suspect," the professor said.

In the past two months, fighting has become bloodier. According to Government sources, 243 guerrillas and 56 civilians have been killed, although there is widespread skepticism that all the guerrillas belong to Sendero. Almost 40 policemen are reported to have been killed by Sendero, but only five so far this year.

More than 500 suspects are being held in Lima prisons, awaiting trial.

In late January, eight journalists and their guide were slaughtered by campesinos in the community of Uchuraccay, about 70 kilometers northeast of Ayacucho. The reporters had gone to investigate earlier army claims that the peasants had killed Senderistas. Officially, the reporters were mistaken for guerrillas.

However, journalists who interviewed the Uchuraccay peasants were told another version. "The Si nchis told us to kill any strangers who came here and cut their tongues and throw them to the dogs to eat," one peasant said.

The police have begun to offer prizes to campesinos who bring in guerrillas, dead or alive, in order to encourage vigilante action.