

Peru Fears Reemergence of Violent Rebels

Shining Path Movement Aided by Drug Traffickers, Police Allege

By Scott Wilson
Washington Post Foreign Service

SANTA LUCIA, Peru -- In the mountains around this jungle town recently weaned from an economy based on illegal drug traffic, the stirrings of a dormant guerrilla organization are raising fears that terrorism is regaining a foothold in Peru's countryside.

A column of rebels from the Shining Path, a radical Maoist movement that terrorized Peru in the 1980s and early 1990s, assaulted the army barracks in nearby Nuevo Progreso in June after harassing neighboring towns for several weeks. Although no one was killed, the attack coincided with what police officials here said has been a spike in drug cultivation in these eastern forests and a surge in guerrilla activity, including a Shining Path ambush in August about 200 miles south of here in which four police officers were killed.

In the last few months, the Shining Path has also begun operations in Peru's cities. Last month, the Interior Ministry announced that it had thwarted a Shining Path plan to attack the U.S. Embassy in Lima. The State Department followed with an advisory warning U.S. citizens to avoid Peru, an acknowledgment that the movement, which had declined rapidly after the arrest almost a decade ago of its ideological founder, Abimael Guzman, was resurfacing as a threat.

National police, helped in this drug-producing region by U.S.-donated helicopters, intelligence and training, said the Shining Path is regrouping with far stronger ties than in the past to the drug trade, particularly the lucrative commerce in opium poppies. The money is helping the group modestly increase its numbers in this largely ungoverned expanse of valleys and jungles called the Upper Huallaga and elsewhere across rural Peru. Integral to the process are Colombian drug traffickers, who police said supply farmers with poppy seeds and start-up credits for planting, and provide the Shining Path with arms to protect their investments.

Despite significant past success against the group, national police and intelligence officers have long believed that remnants of the Shining Path had gone underground to wait for a propitious time to reemerge. Now, as Peru struggles through a time of economic uncertainty and political transition, the group may be doing just that.

"What is certain is that they are trying to capitalize on new strategies to expand the reach of their subversion," said Luis Cruzado, the second-in-command of this police anti-drug post where personnel have increased 50 percent in the past year. "Their [Shining Path] growth has not been very vigorous, but it is at the very least maintaining its size and expanding its presence."

Although the Shining Path had never been removed from the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations, its capacity to topple the Peruvian government largely ended with Guzman's capture in September 1992. The former university professor, known to the Shining Path's roughly 5,000 armed members at the time as President Gonzalo, was arrested two years after then-President Alberto Fujimori took office on a pledge to end the movement. Guzman said Peru's social order had to be destroyed to make way for a new one, a plan that called for killing 10 percent of the civilian population.

Guzman's arrest, which followed a stepped-up five-month urban bombing campaign by the group, led to a peace agreement between the Shining Path and the government. Only a hard-line faction, headed by Oscar Ramirez Durand, refused to sign. Known as Commander Feliciano, Ramirez operated here in the Upper Huallaga for years until his capture in 1999.

President Alejandro Toledo, who took office in July, has condemned the human rights abuses of the disgraced Fujimori government, many stemming from the campaign against the Shining Path, and he has slashed military spending for the coming year. Toledo also has signaled that he was taking the Shining Path seriously, recently announcing plans to open 100 new rural police posts.

According to an internal Interior Ministry analysis dated Dec. 3 of the Shining Path's strategy, the group intends to have its urban militias operating by January, and was behind a "Yankees Out of Afghanistan" graffiti campaign that began in Lima in October. Although the Shining Path does not have the capability to challenge the army, the analysis concludes, "it is able to carry out armed actions with certain political and military repercussions in the city of Lima if the [armed forces] do not remain alert."

But the Toledo administration's recent handling of the plan to attack the U.S. Embassy was clumsy, according to sources familiar with the incident. At a news conference last month, Interior Minister Fernando Rospigliosi announced the arrest of two alleged Shining Path members, who were found with diagrams of the embassy and were allegedly planning an attack for Dec. 3, Guzman's birthday.

The announcement undermined a larger sting operation targeting the group's Lima cell, according to sources familiar with the investigation, which involved U.S. and Peruvian intelligence agencies. The investigation had safe houses and senior leaders under surveillance, but the announcement scuttled the arrests. A few days later, the Shining Path blew up an electricity tower 30 miles from Lima.

"If this happened, it might have been a result of lack of communication or a lack of experience in the job, or both," said Roberto Danino, Peru's appointed prime minister.

Interviews with police and U.S. anti-drug advisers in the Upper Huallaga suggest that it is difficult to determine whether the Shining Path is resurfacing as an ideological movement or a drug gang working for Colombian sponsors, who supply the cash, seeds and technological know-how.

Police officials said that, while the Shining Path made money from the drug trade during its first campaigns, it is bringing in far more today because of its involvement in protecting opium poppies, the key ingredient in heroin. Processed poppies fetch more than twice the price of coca, the key ingredient in cocaine.

There are obstacles to the rebel group's growth. Numbering roughly 600 soldiers, the movement has lost its ideological leadership, and only two commanders have anything approaching national name recognition. They are known by their guerrilla names -- Dalton, who attended the group's first training camp with Guzman, and Artemio, who replaced Feliciano in the Upper Huallaga. But even the movement's limited resurgence is threatening to undermine U.S.-sponsored successes in reducing drug production in this region, once the heart of the world's coca industry.

In the mountains around Santa Lucia, a town of a few thousand peasants where U.S.-supported alternative development projects have helped turn coca fields into palm-oil farms, police destroyed about 60 acres of poppy plants last year. This year they have pulled up five times that amount and destroyed two morphine labs that officials said were likely built by the more sophisticated Colombian drug traffickers.

"It could be because they are looking harder," said a U.S. anti-drug adviser of the spike in poppy seizures, "but in all likelihood it means there is a lot more of it."

Demonstenes Garcia, commander of the police anti-drug base in Tingo Maria south of here, predicted growth in the opium poppy trade in the coming year. In recent months, Garcia's men have seized 25 pounds of processed opium poppy and dozens of pounds of coca base from the nearby Monzon Valley. Nine Colombians have been arrested.

"Because there is so much violence right now in Colombia, Peru has the capacity to be the heroin capital of Latin America," Garcia said. Last year, 70 percent of the heroin seized on the U.S. eastern seaboard came from Latin America, the vast majority from Peru and Colombia.

The Monzon Valley, opening onto the town of Tingo Maria, poses a particular challenge to U.S. anti-drug strategy. In the past year, coca cultivation has jumped 15 percent in this valley alone, to more than 30,000 acres, while poppy cultivation is increasing in the hard-to-reach cloud-shrouded mountain peaks, police said.

Coca farmers have reneged on an agreement, signed by the previous government, to limit coca fields to less than three acres per family pending the arrival of money that would pay them to plant new crops. The Toledo government has not decided how to proceed with the unruly population, which includes a significant Shining Path presence.

"There is no control in this zone," said Gonzalo Mosqueira Roncal, who heads the Interior Ministry's alternative development program. "In other zones, the cultivation is going down. Here it is increasing dramatically. And it is . . . narco-traffickers and the Shining Path. Here they are the same."