

Peru: Blood Flows in the Amazon

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In early June, Peruvian President Alan García, an ally of US President Barack Obama, ordered armored personnel carriers, helicopter gun-ships and hundreds of heavily armed troops to assault and disperse a peaceful, legal protest organized by members of Peru's Amazonian indigenous communities protesting the entry of foreign multinational mining companies on their traditional homelands. Dozens of Indians were killed or are missing, scores have been injured and arrested and a number of Peruvian police, held hostage by the indigenous protestors were killed in the assault. President García declared martial law in the region in order to enforce his unilateral and unconstitutional fiat granting of mining exploitation rights to foreign companies, which infringed on the integrity of traditional Amazonian indigenous communal lands.

Alan García is no stranger to government-sponsored massacres. In June 1986, he ordered the military to bomb and shell prisons in the capital holding many hundreds of political prisoners protesting prison conditions - resulting in over 400 known victims. Later obscure mass graves revealed dozens more. This notorious massacre took place while García was hosting a gathering of the so-called 'Socialist' International in Lima. His political party, APRA (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance) a member of the 'International', was embarrassed by the public display of its 'national-socialist' proclivities, before hundreds of European Social Democrat functionaries. Charged with misappropriation of government funds and leaving office with an inflation rate of almost 8,000% in 1990, he agreed to support Presidential candidate Alberto Fujimori in exchange for amnesty. When Fujimori imposed a dictatorship in 1992, García went into self-imposed exile in Colombia and later, France. He returned in 2001 when the statute of limitations on his corruption charges had expired and Fujimori was forced to resign amidst charges of running death squads and spying on his critics. García won the 2006 Presidential elections in a run-off against the pro-Indian nationalist candidate and former Army officer, Ollanta Humala, thanks to financial and media backing by Lima's rightwing, ethnic European oligarchs and US overseas 'AID' agencies.

Back in power, García left no doubt about his political and economic agenda. In October 2007 he announced his strategy of placing foreign multi-national mining companies at the center of his economic 'development' program, while justifying the brutal displacement of small producers from communal lands and indigenous villages in the name of 'modernization'.

García pushed through congressional legislation in line with the US-promoted 'Free Trade Agreement of the Americas' or ALCA. Peru was one of only three Latin American nations to support the US proposal. He opened Peru to the unprecedented plunder of its resources, labor, land and markets by the multinationals. In late 2007, García began to award huge tracts of traditional indigenous lands in the Amazon region for exploitation by foreign mining and energy multinationals. This was in violation of a 1969 International Labor Organization-brokered agreement obligating the Peruvian government to consult and negotiate with the indigenous inhabitants over exploitation of their lands and rivers. Under his 'open door' policy, the mining sector of the economy expanded rapidly and made huge profits from the record-high world commodity prices and the growing Asian (Chinese) demand for raw materials.

The multinational corporations were attracted by Peru's low corporate taxes and royalty payments and virtually free access to water and cheap government-subsidized electricity rates. The enforcement of environmental regulations was suspended in these ecologically fragile regions, leading to wide-spread contamination of the rivers, ground water, air and soil in the surrounding indigenous communities. Poisons from mining operations led to massive fish kills and rendered the water unfit for drinking. The operations decimated the tropical forests, undermining the livelihood of tens of thousands of villagers engaged in traditional artisan work and subsistence forest gathering and agricultural activities.

The profits of the mining bonanza go primarily to the overseas companies. The García regime distributes state revenues to his supporters among the financial and real estate speculators, luxury goods importers and political cronies in Lima's enclosed upscale, heavily guarded neighborhoods and exclusive country-clubs. As the profit margins of the multinationals reached an incredible 50% and government revenues exceeded \$1 billion US dollars, the indigenous communities lacked paved roads, safe water, basic health services and schools. Worse still, they experienced a rapid deterioration of their everyday lives as the influx of mining capital led to increased prices for basic food and medicine. Even the World Bank in its Annual Report for 2008 and the editors of the Financial Times of London urged the García regime to address the growing discontent and crisis among the indigenous communities.

Delegations from the indigenous communities had traveled to Lima to try to establish a dialogue with the President in order to address the degradation of their lands and communities. The delegates were met with closed doors. García maintained that 'progress and modernity come from the big investments by the multinationals...(rather than) the poor peasants who haven't a centavo to invest.' He interpreted the appeals for peaceful dialogue as a sign of weakness among the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon and increased his grants of exploitation concessions to foreign MNCs even deeper into the Amazon. He cut off virtually all possibility for dialogue and compromise with the Indian communities.

The Amazonian Indian communities responded by forming the Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSEP). They held public protests for over 7 weeks culminating in the blocking of two transnational highways. This enraged García, who referred to the protestors as 'savages and barbarians' and sent police and military units to suppress the mass action. What García failed to consider was the fact that a significant proportion of indigenous men in these villages had served as army conscripts, who fought in the 1995 war against Ecuador while others had been trained in local self-defense community organizations. These combat veterans were not intimidated by state terror and their resistance to the initial police attacks resulted in both police and Indian casualties. García then declared 'war on the savages' sending a heavy military force with helicopters and armored troops with orders to 'shoot to kill'. AIDSEP activists report over one hundred deaths among the indigenous protestors and their families: Indians were murdered in the streets, in their homes and workplaces. The remains of many victims are believed to have been dumped in the ravines and rivers.

Conclusion

The Obama regime has predictably not issued a single word of concern or protest in the face of one of the worst massacres of Peruvian civilians in this decade - perpetrated by one of America's closest remaining allies in Latin America. García, taking his talking points from the US Ambassador, accused Venezuela and Bolivia of having instigated the Indian 'uprising', quoting a letter of support from Bolivia's President Evo Morales sent to an intercontinental conference of Indian communities held in Lima in May as 'proof'. Martial law was declared and the entire Amazon region of Peru is

being militarized. Meetings are banned and family members are forbidden from searching for their missing relatives.

Throughout Latin America, all the major Indian organizations have expressed their solidarity with the Peruvian indigenous movements. Within Peru, mass social movements, trade unions and human rights groups have organized a general strike on June 11. Fearing the spread of mass protests, El Comercio, the conservative Lima daily, cautioned García to adopt some conciliatory measures to avoid a generalized urban uprising. A one-day truce was declared on June 10, but the Indian organizations refused to end their blockade of the highways unless the García Government rescinds its illegal land grant decrees.

In the meantime, a strange silence hangs over the White House. Our usually garrulous President Obama, so adept at reciting platitudes about diversity and tolerance and praising peace and justice, cannot find a single phrase in his prepared script condemning the massacre of scores of indigenous inhabitants of the Peruvian Amazon. When egregious violations of human rights are committed in Latin America by a US backed client-President following Washington's formula of 'free trade', deregulation of environmental protections and hostility toward anti-imperialist countries (Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador), Obama favors complicity over condemnation.

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