

Peru's García takes emergency measures to defend the nation

by Valerie Rush

On Jan. 9, Peruvian President Alan García ordered out the military to patrol the borders, and to take over all transportation and distribution of the nation's potato supplies. It is one of a series of emergency measures García decreed at the start of the new year to carry out his pledge that the Peruvian people shall not be allowed to starve.

At the same time, the Peruvian President has continued to escalate his war on drugs, this time turning his guns on the higher-ups in the financial world who make the laundering of the drug trade's profits possible. And, in collaboration with the Catholic Church, he has begun to move against the proliferation of drug-running pseudo-religious sects who exploit the desperation and poverty of rural Peru.

García's non-stop campaigns to restore his nation's sovereignty have provoked a nervous response from *New York Times* scribbler Alan Riding, who wrote on Dec. 25 that García "has opened fire in all directions at the same time, which has to be dangerous. But he has also hit a number of targets, and that has encouraged him to keep on firing, which may also be dangerous."

Riding's characterization of García as a man "obsessed by the urgency of transforming this country in his single five-year term" was more aptly phrased by Pope John Paul II during his February 1985 tour of Ibero-America, which included Peru. The Pope told millions of Peruvians at the time: "This is the time for men of audacity [who can ensure] that the people of your cities, your farmers . . . have their basic human dignity affirmed. . . ." Alan García took office in July.

Food and dignity

President García's pledge to feed his people is no mere populist appeal, but an urgent necessity if the nation is to survive. According to statistics released by the Food and Agricultural Organization in October, 80% of all Peruvians are considered malnourished, and only 5% of the population has "a good diet" by FAO standards. García has publicly charged that the years of austerity policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund "dramatically aggravated" the country's hunger, and in his Nov. 11 address to the FAO in Rome, promised to "relaunch agriculture, the source of well-being and nourishment," through increasing both production and consumption by any and all measures necessary.

Those "any and all measures" included his July 28 (inauguration day) announcement of a 90-day government-decreed price freeze on a wide range of basic food products, a decree later extended through June of 1986 and which quickly led to confrontation not only with producers, transporters, and wholesalers, but with his own Agriculture Minister, Mario Barturen, who denounced García's price-control policy as "police measures" that violated the law of the marketplace. Barturen is a former accountant for the television network Panamerican, which is in turn linked to Manuel Ulloa, the man whose economic policies as finance minister under Belaunde Terry helped convert Peru into a haven for the drug mob.

On Jan. 7, Barturen was fired. The President clearly means business.

On Jan. 8, following a six-hour session in the ministry of

agriculture, García gave precise instructions to the commander-in-chief of the Peruvian Army to crack down on food contraband flows across the national borders, which he described as "an act of treason." Rice, sugar, and powdered milk, all government-subsidized, have been among the basic food products which have been disappearing from Peruvian territory, while beef, chicken, and potatoes have been vanishing from the markets since Christmas—the result of wholesaler hoarding to force a price hike.

To deal with the lack of potato supplies in Peruvian cities, García ordered the deployment of army trucks to Huanuco and other centers of potato production to bring back some 6,000 metric tons, bypassing the wholesalers and thereby guaranteeing normalization of supply to the population. He has also begun negotiations for importing potatoes from Colombia, intended both to serve as back-up in case of future shortages and to help regulate market prices.

Although Barturen had informed the Peruvian lower classes that red meat was to be considered a luxury beyond their reach, García has ordered emergency purchases of beef from Argentina and Uruguay, and the placing on the market at near wholesale cost of 1,500 tons of New Zealand lamb that were being stored in government warehouses. Another 1,500 tons of lamb are being brought over from New Zealand in the next two weeks. In addition, 40 metric tons of chicken and shipments of fertilized eggs ready for incubation are en route to Lima from the United States.

García informed the population that the chicken shortage was, in part, due to the increased buying power of the population which has gone from eating mostly potatoes to including chicken in their diet as well. He told reporters on Jan. 8: "We should not lose our calm over this patch of bad times. . . . We will overcome our obstacles."

Not content with bringing in emergency food supplies, García has also ordered a total revamping of the country's food wholesale market, with one-by-one evaluation of wholesalers to eliminate those who, either through inefficiency or criminal behavior, have been charging exorbitant prices for their goods.

García's measures, while highly popular with the majority of the Peruvian people, have met with fierce resistance from the "free market" economists who, like Barturen, argue that the food shortages Peru is currently facing are the result not of deliberate sabotage, but of "an impractical, unrealistic price-control policy." Food industry mouthpieces, not content with the increased credit, lowered interest rates, and generous tax breaks offered by the President to encourage increased production and to compensate for initial per-item profit losses, are threatening that in one or two months, "there will be nothing left to eat but fingernails!"

García is also facing resistance from the leadership of his own APRA party, reportedly incensed at the firing of Barturen. It remains to be seen whether the new agriculture minister, Remigio Morales Bermúdez, son of former President Francisco Morales Bermúdez, will prove a "loyalist" to García or another Barturen.

One of Morales's first statements after his swearing-in Jan. 9 was to call for up to 20 years of imprisonment for hoarders and speculators.

Drugs, usury and corruption

García has simultaneously continued to press forward with his crusade against the frequently related problems of drugs, usury, and corruption. On Jan. 6, the Banco Amazónico, the dominant financial institution in the Amazon region of Peru, was taken over by the government. The bank, which had operated one of the most overt drug-money laundering operations in the region, and whose vice-president owns one of the mafia's most infamous air taxi (read: smuggling) services in the Amazon, had remained untouched throughout the Central Bank administration of Harvard professor Richard Webb. Webb was dumped by President García last December and his successor, Lionel Figueroa, moved against the bank almost as soon as he took office.

Still another flank in the war on drugs was opened late last month when García challenged the Supreme Court to either clean up its own act, or have it cleaned up. The government had sent scores of reports on cases of judicial corruption to the Court, but no action was ever taken. On Dec. 31, García asked, "What is it worth for a Civil Guard to risk his life, if we still do not have a judicial power willing to act and struggle against crime." The Supreme Court president protested what he called "interference and pressure" from the executive, but was chastised by the Justice Minister, who warned that the judiciary's autonomy did not mean "extraterritoriality." The Peruvian Congress sided with the President.

Fresh from his success in imposing Peruvian terms on the oil multinationals which have been looting Peru blind for years, García has extended his investigations to the mining sector. On Dec. 30, García named Southern Peru Copper Company, a huge open-pit operation run by Lazard Frères bank, among others, as warranting an investigation by the mines and energy ministry on its tax payments and profit remittances. A similar examination would be made of all the mining companies, promised García.

Going after the cults

A more recent flank has been opened against the rapidly proliferating cults and sects which prey upon the poor throughout Ibero-America. In particular, the García government has been working with Interpol in the prosecution of the so-called "Children of God" and "Messengers of God" cults, which have not accidentally centered their operations in the cocaine-producing region around Cuzco, Peru. These cults have been accused of kidnapping, brainwashing, and abusing hundreds and possibly thousands of children.

Monsignor Luciano Metzinger, president of Peru's National Episcopal Commission on Social Communication, urged the García government to move quickly against these mass kidnapers, while the Peruvian daily *Hoy* urged the government to apply tax and other fiscal sanctions to dry up the funds of these insidious cults.