

Massacre in Peru's Prisons

El Fronton prison, 1984.



**“This Blood
That Has
Been Spilt
Shall**

Never Be Forgotten”

The massacre the Peruvian government unleashed against the revolutionary prisoners of war was premeditated and planned in advance. What was unexpected was the fierce resistance of the prisoners, who for several days battled the government troops who had come to kill them. The contrast between the heroic resistance of the prisoners and the cowardly brutality of the reaction has further unmasked and weakened the García regime and propelled the revolutionary struggle forward.

The revolutionary conduct of the hundreds of captured fighters in Peru has been an increasingly severe political problem for the government. In 1982, after an astonishing PCP attack led to the freeing of hundreds of prisoners held in the Ayacucho gaol, the authorities adopted the policy of concentrating suspected revolutionaries in the Lurigancho prison for men near Lima, the Callao women's prison,

and the Fronton island prison about 10 kilometres offshore. People all over the world would come to look to these prisons with respect and admiration for the way these prisoners persisted in their revolutionary struggle even under these conditions and for their determination to turn these places into “shining trenches of combat” where they carried out political, ideological and physical training and the production of revolutionary art and handicrafts. These prisons became a symbol of the political and moral bankruptcy of the regime and its increasing inability to quench the raging peoples war.

There were a number of attacks on the prisoners, both outright murderous assaults which have resulted in many deaths over several years as well as daily harassment and attempts to break their health and spirits. In July 1985, simultaneously with nationwide military actions directed by the PCP, prisoners of

war at Callao, Fronton and Lurigancho seized guards as hostages and took their weapons, and dug themselves in. They demanded that the government sign an agreement with them, the main point of which was that those jailed as “suspected terrorists” would not be dispersed to other prisons or transferred to the new high-security prison being constructed at Canto Grande. The outgoing Belaúnde government gave in and signed these agreements. In October 1985, the García government, which had then just taken office, renounced the agreements and sent in assault guards to Lurigancho. This act of revenge led to the murder of about 50 prisoners.

In mid-1986 the García government revived the idea of sending the prisoners to Canto Grande, and/or transferring many of them back to prisons in the emergency zone under military rule. In April, Navy Rear Admiral Ponce Canessa, a commander of the marines who'd been

in charge of counter-insurgency operations for the Armed Forces Joint Command, a man who had supervised a series of mass murders of peasants, had been shot, allegedly by the PCP. All kinds of authorities in and out of the government were talking about how the armed services had to take vengeance to restore their sinking morale — and that the armed forces themselves would have to “restore order” in the prisons. The plan to transfer the prisoners to where they would be under direct military control was an open threat to murder them.

A letter written by prisoners at Lurigancho appeared in the 19 May 1986 issue of the Peruvian magazine *Equis X*. This letter denounced the massacres committed by the Navy in Aucayacu, Llochegua and Tambo and “the killings carried out by the Marine intelligence service in Huambo, Huaychao, Iquicha, Uchuraccy, with the direct participation of the CIA.” The letter then accused the authorities of planning to use the threatened transfers to carry out the same kind of massacres against them “in order to deal a moral blow to the revolution and the class. They want to take vengeance on the prisoners of war; they are planning to commit genocide against us to pay off this blood debt” of the rear admiral.

“Their main target is Fronton. There is the possibility that they will cook up a provocation. If the Republican Guards (prison guards) can’t deal with it they’ll send in the Marines.

“In Lurigancho, they plan to follow genocide with genocide.

“In Callao, they plan to deal blows to the women.

“We are going to resist. They will not transfer us out of here alive. We demand guarantees against the government’s plans.”

Lawyers for the prisoners denounced the plot to wipe out the prisoners to the press and the public several times during the next month. Later, after the massacre, the *New York Times* would reveal how “officers told of a premeditated plan to mow down every last Sendero captive.”

These revolutionary prisoners chose the path of struggle.

At 6 a.m. on the morning of Wednesday June 18, prisoners at the three penitentiaries once again rose up in unison and seized hostages and weapons. The press later reported that on Fronton’s walls was written, in giant letters, “Finish Off the Great Leap With a Gold Seal,” referring to the final phases of the Party’s Great Leap military campaign to win revolutionary base areas in the countryside. The prisoners issued three demands: that the García regime abide by the agreements the government had signed with the prisoners the year before and recognise them as “special prisoners and not as terrorist criminals”; that there be a law passed guaranteeing that none of the prisoners of war would be transferred to Canto Grande; and that meanwhile none be transferred there.

The government called together the “Peace Commission” it had created to find a “political solution” to the people’s war, the “Parliamentary Human Rights Commission” and the Armed Forces Joint Command. This meeting decided to send in the armed forces. Peruvian Vice President Luis Alberto Sanchez later claimed that this group had tried to negotiate with the prisoners but that they had refused, due to “an almost religious obedience to a new fanaticism.” The world’s reactionary press duly repeated this lie that the prisoners’ “fanaticism” left the government no choice and that they had actually sought their own deaths to “tarnish Peru’s prestige” on the eve of the opening of a Congress of the Socialist International in Lima.

However, the only thing the government was interested in negotiating was a quick death for the prisoners of war.

Not one of the 159 fighters was left alive at Lurigancho. Apparently many of them were taken alive and then methodically bayoneted and shot to death. The government admits 100 killed in this way. The Lurigancho prisoners had held off armed forces commandos and marines throughout the day. They built fortifications in the cell block and the prison yard and fought back with home-made weapons and a

very few captured arms. Television news shots showed the red flag with the PCP’s hammer and sickle emblem flying amid the smoke atop Lurigancho’s walls. The TV transmission was soon cut off due to “technical difficulties.” Finally, combined forces of the Army, Civil Guard and Republican Guard used dynamite to blow down the walls of the cell block where political prisoners are held.

The women at el Callao also apparently held out until Thursday morning. Three or four of the approximately 100 imprisoned there — the numbers differ according to different reports — were killed. Many others were wounded in the fighting. After the prison was retaken by the authorities and declared a military area off-limits to civilians, including lawyers, family members and reporters, the women could be seen from the streets defiantly thrusting their heads out between the bars and chanting “This blood that has been spilt shall never be forgotten” and “Long Live Chairman Gonzalo,” the Chairman of the PCP.

The fog rising from the Lima/Callao bay prevented anyone on shore from seeing what happened at el Fronton. The fighting went on for two days, until Friday morning. Helicopter gunships and naval artillery blasted the small island continually. Frogman demolition teams placed explosive charges. Apparently there was a series of air and sea assaults. After the military finally seized the island, it too was declared a military area, so that two weeks later, it was still not possible to say exactly how many men had died or what had exactly happened. The armed forces informed relatives of the death of 141 out of 169 men. The authorities have not been able to explain why the prisoners released five prison guards alive early in the fighting.

Hundreds of relatives of the prisoners who demonstrated to denounce the murder then in progress were attacked and fought with police. There were reports that some of them had been killed as well.

The government reported that three soldiers were killed.

Lurigancho was also declared under military control for a week,

long enough to clean up the evidence. The military disposed of the bodies within hours "to avoid propagandistic actions by subversive groups which operate through legal fronts." But the explosive wave of protest that engulfed Peru forced García to take certain demagogic measures.

A week after the massacre García allowed reporters to tour Lurigancho, since there was no one left alive to dispute the official story there. Of course the prison where there were survivors remained off limits.

García announced that he would see that these events were thoroughly investigated and that "all those responsible would be punished."

In the same message García also expressed his supreme confidence in the Armed Forces Joint Command, and specifically in the Marines, Army and Air Force. "I support the action of the joint command," he said. "The Armed Forces Joint Command has loyally carried out the orders given by the government and we support their actions." However, he went on to say, some people had committed "excesses, instinctive and criminal vengeance." About 15 officers and 80 men of the Republican Guards were arrested for having committed "excesses."

The Republican Guards are a police unit responsible for the security of prisons and other public buildings. They are the smallest, least politically influential of the armed services; their head was recently forced to resign because of other conflicts with the ruling classes. They are not represented on the Armed Forces Joint Command which directed the assault on the three prisons. In other words, they are convenient scapegoats — though murderous ones — for both the government and the armed forces as a whole.

It cannot be said that García retreated, however. He assured reporters that he would do the same thing all over again if he were ever faced with anything else like these prison revolts. "There's nothing to negotiate with those who have no right to anything but legal punishment," he declared.

Despite the cosmetic resignation of the head of the Republican

Guards and the expected resignations of a few other government officials, the Armed Forces remained untouched and publically unrepentant. "My men are trained to kill," General Cisneros told the magazine *Oiga* when he was asked if the government knew what it was asking for when it sent the armed forces into the prisons. "If the Senderists would rather be dead than transferred to the Canto Grande prison, they got what they wanted. It was one of the few times we could give the subversives that pleasure." García added, "The opposition is trying to foment hatred between civilians and the military. The Army deserves respect."

In the immediate wake of the massacre, before the political storm began to break, the chief of the United Left, Lima Mayor Alfonso Barrantes, issued a statement saying "when the law is broken it must be restored" — referring to the prisoners, not the military, although he did think to add "authority should be exercised by carrying out the law and not violating it." Later, this leader of the motley legal left found himself outflanked by the demagoguery of the President.

The Socialist International pronounced itself completely satisfied by García's actions.

The Socialist International opened its first world congress in Latin America in the final hours of the massacre — and it could not have happened at a more fitting moment. This congress, presided over by the former W. German Chancellor Willy Brandt, had been planned to step up certain reactionary efforts by West European imperialism in Latin America. These included supporting García himself (García's APRA party is a member of the Socialist International), as well as establishing the Socialists as the "good guys" of the U.S. bloc by criticising the Reagan administration to some degree on Nicaragua while fundamentally supporting Reagan's justification that the Nicaraguan government has "violated its promised non-alignment."

In both its opening and closing sessions, the Socialist Congress passed resolutions of confidence in the

García government. García made it easier for them by appearing before them and promising to investigate the actions his government had taken. Brandt cynically warned of the danger of a military coup in order to make García seem palatable by comparison.

But none of this could hide the fact that a few hundred prisoners armed with slings, crossbows and a handful of captured weapons (four at el Fronton, according to the government itself) had held off a modern army. The strength of their political line and their class stand under such conditions only made it clearer how strong such a line and stand can become — and are becoming — when they are applied to building up a revolutionary army in the course of a people's war. Almost all the bourgeoisie's commentators are now saying that García, imperialism's great white hope who was supposed to fool some sections of the masses while the armed forces killed off others and thus stabilise the situation for reaction, is facing the worst political crisis of his young regime's life. The Socialist International itself found its role in this massacre and the subsequent manoeuvring to justify it so damaging that press accounts in countries such as Spain, where the Socialists are in power, began calling the congress "a disaster." *El Pais*, a Madrid newspaper associated with the Spanish ruling party, issued a frantic call for a new "extraordinary congress" to repair the damage done at what was supposed to mark the triumph of the Socialist International in Latin America.

As we go to press there have been reports of demonstrations and preparations of demonstrations in a growing number of cities. In Peru itself, newspaper accounts give every indication that in the midst of the García regime's grave political crisis and isolation the PCP is striving to deal it military blows so as to further weaken the regime and build up the People's Guerrilla Army and the revolutionary base areas where a new democratic, revolutionary regime is being born. □