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(U) PERU'S SENDERO LUMINOSO: WAR IN THE
CORNER OF THE DEAD

Introduction and Summary

(U) Peru returned to democracy in May 1980. Later that same year, dead dogs hanging from lampposts in Lima announced the surfacing of an obscure subversive group, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). Lima residents did not fathom the message of the dead dogs and soon forgot them. A short time later, hanging dogs appeared again, this time in the remote Andean department of Ayacucho, 250 miles southeast of Lima. The Quechua-speaking peasants of Ayacucho, whose name in the local tongue means "Corner of the Dead," understood the symbolic message of impending death.

(C) Armed struggle, slow in starting, in the intervening years has claimed an estimated 3,000-4,000 lives and has evolved into a campaign of random urban attacks and cruel rural massacres. The Belaunde administration, fearing the possible human rights consequences of military control of the counterterrorist campaign, initially gave responsibility to the police. When the police proved inadequate to the task, and the attacks had spread to Lima and other cities, the government sent the armed forces into Ayacucho in December 1982. In July 1984, the military took charge of the antiterrorist campaign nationwide.

(C) The military, unable to extinguish Sendero Luminoso, now complains of unnecessary constitutional restrictions on its operations. Reports are emerging of widespread brutality by the security forces, and allegations of an "Argentinization" of Peru's anti-terrorist campaign have been made. The military recently replaced the commander of the Ayacucho emergency zone when he said publicly that the solution to the problem hinged on the social and economic development of Peru's poor regions rather than on a purely military approach.

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(C) Throughout, Sendero Luminoso has remained an enigmatic group. Founded by philosophy professor Abimael Guzman Reinoso (whose current whereabouts are unknown) and taking its name from the 1928 writings of Peruvian Marxist Jose Carlos Mariategui, the group models itself on the revolutionary theories of China's Mao Zedong and Kampuchea's Pol Pot. It regards itself as the world's only true revolutionary vanguard, despises just about everyone--including the Soviet bloc and modern China--and shuns outside assistance. A low-budget operation variously estimated to comprise 500-7,000 militants organized in tight cells, Sendero Luminoso has remained difficult to penetrate. Although not capable of sophisticated, large-scale operations, it has expanded outside its traditional stronghold of Ayacucho, launching attacks in several cities, including Lima. Bringing the war to the capital has been particularly effective in raising the level of political tension in Peru.

(C) The civilian government finds itself in a difficult position. Sendero Luminoso is ruthless and not open to dialogue, regards the entire Peruvian political system--democratic or not--as bankrupt, and during 1983 and 1984 stepped up violence. The military urges all-out war against the guerrillas, free from the restraints imposed by constitutional order. Liberals call for alleviating the causes of subversion through extensive economic development which Peru cannot afford in its current financial difficulties. Unwilling to unleash the military and unable to devote economic resources to the problem, Belaunde and Peru's politicians will confront an increasingly bleak situation. The combination of economic deterioration and subversive violence threatens the continuance of democratic government. The rising tensions between the military and the civilian authorities brought about by terrorist violence increase the risk of a military coup, jeopardizing the presidential elections scheduled for April 1985.

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The Shining Path to Revolution

(U) In 1928, Mariategui wrote that "Marxism-Leninism will open the shining path to revolution." In 1970, Guzman and his devoted following of leftist students at the University of Ayacucho broke with the Peruvian Communist Party and formed the Communist Party for the Shining Path of Mariategui, or Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path).

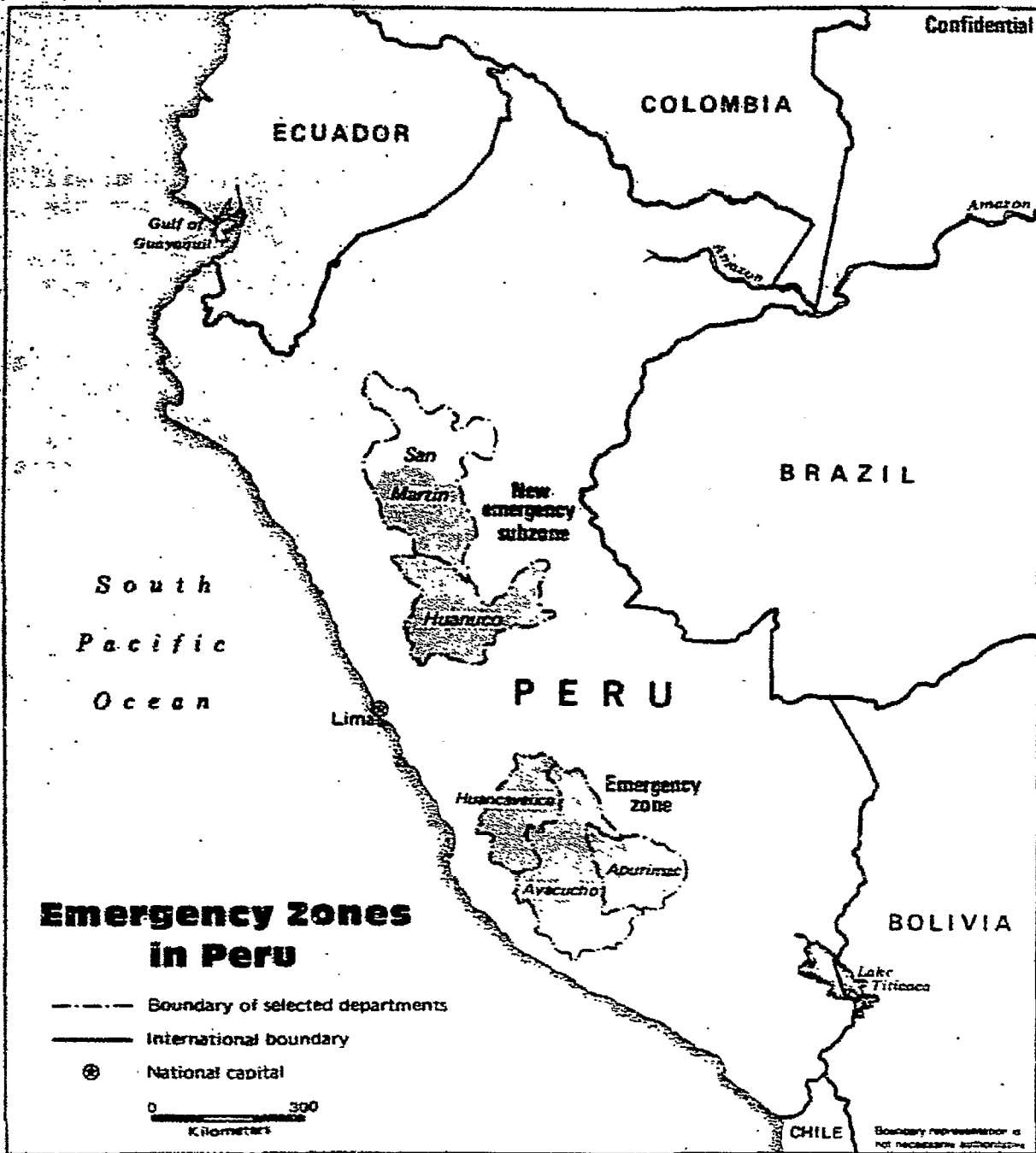
(U) The mountainous Ayacucho region, inhabited by about half a million Quechua-speaking peasants--70 percent of whom speak no Spanish at all--is almost completely divorced from the coastal region that forms modern Peru. Traditionally neglected, it is without industry or steady public works programs and has extremely poor soil. Average life expectancy is about 45 years; running water, electricity, and medical services are almost nonexistent outside the few main towns. Much of the region is not even accurately mapped.

(U) During the 1970s, Sendero Luminoso activists fanned out across Ayacucho, learning its language and customs and preaching their brand of agrarian communism. They worked their way into key positions as school teachers, agricultural advisers, and peasant organizers. Sometime during this period, Sendero's political philosophy evolved into a more radical, militant one, which advocated armed struggle as the only way to achieve lasting change in Peru. Sendero Luminoso made no distinction between military or democratic regimes, denouncing the entire Peruvian political structure as bankrupt. Most Peruvian leftists of the day fashionably spoke of armed struggle, but Guzman and his followers believed what they said.

(C) In 1978, Guzman disappeared from public view. He may have been imprisoned for a time in 1979. Recent rumors have him living disguised as a monk in a remote monastery, and his state of health is not known. He reportedly suffered from a potentially fatal skin disease and may be dead. Whatever his fate, Guzman survives as a potent force in the Sendero pantheon. Transformed into Comrade (sometimes President) Gonzalo, Guzman has become the "Fourth Sword of Communism," alongside Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Gonzalo's "guiding thoughts," usually expressed as Maoist-sounding aphorisms, have inspired the party faithful, including more than 800 in jail. His use of peasant occult customs and messianic traditions has built support among the peasantry. Gonzalo numbered among the ill-fated of the world all forms of communism, Peru's

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Marxist parties ("parliamentary cretins"), capitalism, and US and Soviet "imperialism." Sendero has attacked the US and Chinese Embassies and the office of the Soviet airline Aeroflot in Lima.

(U) Sendero Luminoso issues no communiques, manifestos, or other public documents. Its leaders are well-hidden and do not grant interviews or otherwise exploit media outlets to explain their aims. Organized in tight cells, Sendero has proved resistant to penetration by the security forces. From what can be pieced together from numerous sources, including a 1971 pamphlet written by Guzman, Sendero fashions its revolution after those of Mao and Pol Pot. It sees Peru as "a semifeudal and semicolonial society...abused by a minority for centuries." The intent is to launch an offensive "that may take 20 years" in which the peasants will surround and cut off the cities and finally take them. The armed struggle was launched as Peru returned to democratic rule in 1980 to emphasize the view that all regimes are equally bad and to take advantage of the inherent difficulties that face any government trying both to preserve democracy and to combat terrorism.

(C) Between 1980 and 1982, the insurgency was limited to sporadic raids on government outposts in the Andes and local assassinations. It seemed to pose little threat to the Belaunde government. What the government failed to notice, or at least would not publicly admit, was that Sendero Luminoso had won strong support in the countryside by holding regular indoctrination meetings at which its members distributed food, executed "enemies of the people"--criminals, local officials, teachers, wealthy merchants--and otherwise ingratiated themselves to peasants who had been ignored by the authorities for decades. The pattern changed abruptly on March 2, 1982, when a Sendero force of perhaps 150 attacked the regional capital, Ayacucho City, with automatic weapons and dynamite, blacking it out and freeing all 247 inmates of the maximum security prison. The government declared the region to be an "emergency zone."

(C) Violence perpetrated by Sendero Luminoso since the Ayacucho raid has become more widespread and intense. The group has expanded its scope of operations beyond Ayacucho, and the government has declared a new emergency zone in the Huallaga River Valley (see map). Sendero has also launched repeated attacks in Lima, recruiting from among the urban poor. Its urban activities gain more media exposure and middle-class attention and have significantly increased Peruvian political tension. Within the emergency zones--areas accustomed to violence and brutality--Sendero tactics now include periodic massacres of peasants unsympathetic to the cause. Sendero cadres reportedly have not spared women, young children, or elderly people. Fueling local fears and rivalries, the killings have sparked retaliatory slaughters by peasants of suspected Sendero sympathizers, rival village groups, and unsuspecting outsiders.

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(C) Sendero Luminoso steals most of its guns and dynamite and finances itself principally through protection money, informal road "tolls" in the emergency zones, and occasional bank robberies. Although it operates in many of the same areas as narcotics traffickers, there is no evidence of a narco-terrorist link; each group appears to leave the other alone. Although this self-sufficient policy limits the sophistication of Sendero's operations, members have been resourceful in fabricating crude but effective weapons--llama-hair slings to hurl dynamite, fishing-line guns for mortars, etc. Lack of military prowess is at least partially compensated for by zeal.

(C) The Government's Response

President Belaunde initially dismissed Sendero Luminoso members as "common delinquents" and left the fight against them to the local police forces. The police, untrained, underequipped, and unloved by the local populace, generally fled when attacked and made no efforts to infiltrate the Sendero organization. The peasants regarded them as foreign interlopers. Belaunde's reluctance to send in the armed forces was partially attributable to his underestimation of the Sendero Luminoso threat. It was reinforced, however, by his belief that military involvement could endanger democracy. Belaunde feared that a military campaign would lead to widespread human rights abuses and calls by the high command for suspension of legal "niceties" which could impede antiterrorist operations.

Government policy began to change after the 1982 attack on Ayacucho City. The initial response was to airlift an elite police group known as the Sinchis ("brave warriors" in Quechua) into the emergency zone. Although more heavily armed and somewhat more highly trained than the regular police, the Sinchis fared little better. Unable to speak the local language, the troops were suspicious of the peasants. The peasants resented heavy-handed Sinchi tactics. The "brave warriors" kept retreating in the face of Sendero attacks and eventually were withdrawn, leaving Ayacucho in Sendero control.

In December 1982, the government sent 3,000-4,000 troops--half from the army, marines, and air force and the rest police--into the Ayacucho emergency zone. Army Gen. Clemente Noel was appointed political-military commander of the zone. Although there were initial reports of successes, the campaign was poorly planned and executed and soon bogged down. In late 1983, Noel was replaced by a Quechua-speaking son of peasants, Gen. Adrian Huaman Centeno. In July 1984, Belaunde yielded to pressures and gave the armed forces a broad, somewhat vaguely worded mandate to take control of the antiterrorist campaign nationwide. Huaman combined toughness with attempts to win the hearts and minds of the local

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population through civic actions and closer relations between the troops and the locals. Most military commanders, however, saw no merit in a hearts-and-minds approach. After Huaman said in a late August television interview that the solution to the insurgency lay in social and economic development, rather than a purely military approach, he was dismissed by the high command.

As the armed forces took increasing control of the fight against the Sendero, reports began to filter out of the emergency zones of human rights abuses and brutality by the security forces. This has prompted growing fears in Peru that the military will "Argentinize" the conflict, adopting the same brutal tactics that characterized Argentina's 1976-81 "dirty war" against subversion. Disquiet increased as military spokesmen, including ex-President Gen. Morales Bermudez, began calling for a suspension of the full range of legal "niceties" in order to deal with what they described as "a state of internal war."

Although there is no evidence of a policy of systematic, officially condoned abuses, it is evident that excesses are occurring and that commanders have made little effort to prevent or punish abuses. The latest incidents involve the disappearances of a Peruvian reporter and a prominent peasant leader (confirmed dead) and the discovery of a mass grave containing the bodies of 50 people who had been methodically executed and mutilated to prevent identification. Official explanations of these events have been unconvincing, and suspicions increasingly point to involvement by the security forces.

Belaunde, and whoever succeeds him in 1985, faces an increasingly dismal situation. Sendero Luminoso shows no signs of renouncing its ruthless armed struggle, and the military is not receptive to the idea of dialogue, even if it were feasible. The armed forces do not appear capable of winning militarily and may be tempted to try physically annihilating Sendero Luminoso by eliminating everyone suspected of being a member or sympathizer. There is no financing available for large-scale development programs to alleviate the crushing poverty and backwardness of the emergency zones, even if the political will to do so was to be found. In sum, there is a growing danger that the Shining Path to revolution may become instead the path that returns Peru to a repeat of the 1968 military coup that set aside civilian rule for over a decade.

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