PERU

Peru's Misfired Guerrilla Campaign

By Norman Gall

Several times a year on Saturday nights, the peasants of the Valley of La Convención at the eastern base of the Andes in southern Peru used to forgather in the sprawling. dusty plaza of this tiny market town. They would start coming around midnight, the men marching six abreast in sandals cut from old rubber tires and shouting *"Tiara a* muerte!"—"Land or death!' They carried no weapons, although the barefoot women who followed them, some with infants bound to their backs in shawls, had rocks bundled in their wine-colored homespun skirts. The men wore faded brown ponchos and floppy sheepskin hats. Their next day's lunch, pieces of yucca and salted meat, was tied inside sweat-stained sashes around their waists.

When dawn came, they formed small groups around the benches of the plaza, watched uneasily from the police station by Civil Guards. By noon, there were usually three thousand in the plaza for these political meetings of the peasant leagues, or *sindicatos.* They came on asses or in trucks from the remote haciendas of the Valley; many had traveled all night, sustained by the sugar-based brew called *aguardiente.* Through the afternoon they cheered in Spanish and Quechua (the An-dean vernacular once used by the Incas) as their leaders urged them to seize the land "because it is ours" and to stop providing labor on the haciendas- They cheered whatever they heard.

Some of the speakers were Communist university students from Cuzco, the old Incan capital two hundred miles away, who had descended to La Convención to help organize the *sindicatos.* In the angry delirium of those hot afternoons, the Communist orators often harangued the peasants on matters they could understand only remotely, if at all—the need for nationalization of the Standard Oil subsidiary in Peru and for solidarity with the revolutionary peoples of Cuba and Algeria.

But the main thing these Indian-born sharecroppers seemed to comprehend was the question of land. In convulsive waves of violence that tore up the valley's feudal system of land tenure, the Peasant Federation of La Convención staged a strike to abolish the centuries-old obligation of free labor on the haciendas. Policemen and landlords were ambushed and killed. Serfdom ended as the peasants gained de facto ownership of their miserable subsistence plots, two-thirds of which are too small to feed a family. The landlords had to scour the highlands to find migrant workers to harvest their crops.

Setback for the Guerrillas

This agrarian revolt in La Convención, ending with the 1964 police crackdown on the s*indicatos,* set the stage for what turned out to be a major Communist miscalculation— an attempt to follow the land seizures with a "war of national liberation" through guerrilla insurgency in the twelve-thousand-foot-high Mesa Pelada that rises abruptly from La Convención Valley.

Like many of the Cuzco students, the guerrilla leaders—an aristocratic-looking lawyer, Luis de La Puente Uceda, and a long-time émigré trained at the Sorbonne, Guillermo Lobatón—

failed to distinguish between Indian hunger for land and apathy toward the politics of revolution. They failed to win sufficient support to withstand the well-executed counterinsurgency operations of the Peruvian Army Ranger Battalions.

The failure of the Communists to understand the peasants probably was responsible for the guerrillas' bad sense of timing. The peasants had just gotten land, which made them much more conservative than a few years before, and they still had hope of getting more through President Fernando Belaúnde Terry's agrarian reform. After the land seizures, the peasants had built new roads and schools. Many bought shoes and trucks and transistor radios.

It remains to be seen whether Belaúnde was right last March when he said: "We have beaten the Communists once and for all. We are sure they won't be back." But the Peruvian experience, coming as it did at a time when Communists at the Tricontinental Conference in Havana were calling for stepped-up terror and subversion in Latin America, is still insufficiently recognized for what it was—a major setback for the advocates of "wars of national liberation." The United States can claim some of the credit; although it is correct, as Belaúnde proudly said, that the Peruvian Rangers were able to crush the guerrillas "without significant foreign military assistance," thousands of Peruvian soldiers were trained at U. S. Army schools, and the US. has contributed more than $120 million in military aid to Peru.

For the rest, Communist ineptitude was largely to blame. Many people in the United States regard Communism so mystically that they are blind to its drabness, its corruption, its stupidity. They forget that Communists are as likely to be followers of revolutions as leaders of them. The Peruvian Moscow-line chief, Raúl Acosta, said after the guerrilla insurgency began that "a revolutionary situation does not exist in Peru." However, the country's far Left is so badly splintered there are at least seven other "Marxist" groups to disagree with the Moscow line. The students, in particular, are not easy for Acosta to control. Most of their leaders are pro-Peking.

Scholarships and Corruption

The universities have been the point of origin for many leftists who turned into Communist insurgents. Between 1960 and 1965, the number of Peruvian universities grew from nine to thirty-three. secondary schools from 170 to six hundred. Many students have read the simple guerrilla tracts of Che Guevara and Mao Tse-tung and consider themselves militant revolutionaries in the Chinese style.

Jorge Monson Pesantes, a lean and cool twenty-nine-year-old law student who is president of the Cuzco Student Federation, told me: "The university movement is a means of achieving national liberation. Many sons of peasants and workers are now entering the university, and progressive thought is having more success. We are still in the beginning stage of understanding what the revolution is all about."

Nevertheless, Monson presidesover a machine that is quite effective politically. Cuzco University has grown from eight hundred students ten years ago to some four thousand, but its budget amounts to only $450 a student each year. The Student Federation has won over many poor students by providing them with "scholarships" of $50 a month. To get them early, the Communist administration of the Ayacucho University maintains a primary and secondary school for four hundred children who receive indoctrination for twelve years. The two radio announcers in the short-wave broadcasts beamed nightly from Moscow in the Quechua tongue are products of the Cuzco and Ayacudto machines.

But pervasive corruption has soured many on these political organizations. Since, under the 1960 university-reform law, professors can be fired by a simple student majority within their college, faculty members are obliged to curry the favor of student leaders, often bribing them with money and high marks. Professors can afford to flunk only a small number of students for failing to attend classes or to master their course material. During the election of university administrative officials, the bribes are often decisive in rallying the necessary student votes to bring aspiring deans and rectors to office.

Once student leaders graduate, many become "juridicial advisers" to the *sindicatos,* partly from political conviction, partly because it is an excellent business. "The Indians axe crazy about legal documents," one Cuzco lawyer told me. "They have no money for shoes or food or medicine, but they will dig up their life savings from a hole in the floor to buy a worthless piece of paper from some crooked lawyer. Here in Cuzco there are experts who specialize in forging colonial sheepskin land titles. To get extra money out of the peasants, the Communist lawyers will tell them that the Yankee imperialists have taken the colonial land records to the United States, and it will cost triple the usual fee to get them back."

The student role in the guerrilla movement goes back to 1960, when Hugo Blanco, a lanky Cuzco youth who was shy in conversation but an excellent orator in Quechua, went to work on a coffee plantation as a subtenant farmer. Blanco, who became a Trotskyite while studying agronomy in Argentina, began preaching revolution and organizing militant *sindicatos.* Soon he was accused of subversion and fled into the hills with a group of peasants armed with shotguns, pistols, and old rifles. First a Civil Guard was killed and arms were seized in an attack on a rural police station; then two more policemen were killed and their weapons taken in an ambush. Cattle thefts from the haciendas increased markedly. It became generally known that the peasants were protecting Blanco and his companions. Despite this, Blanco was captured three years ago after a long manhunt and only last September was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison after a military trial. But his rebellion had changed the valley and laid the groundwork for wider guerrilla operations.

Shortly after Blanco’s capture, Luis de la Puente Uceda, a former student leader who became friendly with Fidel Castro when both were in exile in Mexico in the mid-1950’s, began making preparations for guerrilla activity in the high and wild natural Andean fortress of Mesa Pelada. Since 1960, he had received several thousand dollars from the Castro régime. He was a thin, long-nosed, bespectacled lawyer of thirty-six with the Hispanic stamp of the white-skinned coastal aristocracy. He did not speak Quechua, and the peasants called him a gringo. He was expelled from the neo-Marxist APRA movement in 1959—after heading the Peruvian Students Federation and running the party machine in its electoral bastion of Trujillo— when he protested the formerly leftist APRA’s growing alliance with the Peruvian oligarchy. When the guerrillas finally began operating in central and southern Peru, de la Puente and Guillermo Lobatón— guerrilla chieftain of the Castroite Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR)—seemed to be competing to see whose band would make more headlines.

Their chances of victory were lessened because Belaúnde’s freely elected régime—for all the slowness with which its reform program was being put into practice—had little in common with the brutal and corrupt dictatorships against which guerrilla insurgencies do best. The guerrillas’ probable immediate objective was to provoke the army to seize power, since leftist insurrection could not topple - Belaúnde’s régime, according to Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare:* "Where a government has come to power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not been exhausted."

The tactic failed. Peru’s army, one of the best-disciplined in Latin America, had been getting ready for guerrillas since 1968. Many Peruvian officers and noncoms were among the eighteen thousand Latin-American soldiers trained at the U.S. Army Counterinsurgency School in Panama. Thousands more have undergone Special Forces training in the United States, and others participated in intensive courses in intelligence, logistics, communications, and jungle warfare. In addition, many agents of the Peruvian Investigative Police have attended a counterinsurgency school run by the Central Intelligence Agency. Detailed aerial maps of the Mesa Pelada area were made after Hugo Blanco’s capture, and thousands of Peruvian Rangers were available when de ha Puente’s guerrillas appeared there in May, 1965. The plateau was bombed repeatedly by British-made Canberra bombers of the Peruvian Air Force, even though the area was covered with fog most of the time.

The Army Moves In

The semitropical approaches to Mesa Pelada are winding mountain paths often clogged by high, stiff reeds. Several foot soldiers were killed by mines placed along these trails by the guerrillas. Patrols became lost in Mesa Pelada's twenty thousand acres, and three infantrymen, dressed in summer uniforms, froze to death on one expedition in the higher reaches. Faced with these difficulties in penetrating Mesa Pelada, the army decided to concentrate its main effort in sealing off the mountain paths by which the guerrillas had to enter or leave for food and information.

It now appears that the Mesa Pelada guerrillas were routed within five months of issuing their first press release without a single clash with the army. Their campaign was as good as broken when a thirty-year-old Cuzco University student named Albino Guzmán, who later said he was trained in China, descended from Mesa Pelada and surrendered to a village police post. Guzmán guided army patrols into the guerrilla zone, where thirteen camps were discovered and arms depots were found "with more weapons than the authorities had in all the valley." Peasants who served as porters for the guerrillas later complained that de ha Puente reneged on promises to pay ten times the going rate for delivery of food and weapons.

On October 24, 1965, the Peruvian War Ministry announced that de la Puente and seven other guerrillas had perished in "an intense gun battle" in which no army casualties were reported. The army never produced the dead guerrillas' bodies. However, after ten days of interviewing in the area, it was clear to rue that the guerrillas' adventure lacked even the glamor of death in battle. A few days before de la Puente's death was announced over a national radio network, soldiers marched four guerrillas with their hands raised into a tiny village near the Hacienda Amaybamba. With about a hundred villagers and peasants looking on, the prisoners were placed against the adobe wall of a general store and searched, and then we-e taken down the mountainside in a covered truck. Soon afterward, more soldiers came down the mountain saying that de la Puente himself had been captured in a cornfield. He had been found sitting under a plastic tent, drinking from a can of condensed milk and only asked to be allowed to finish his milk. "We waited all that evening, until midnight, for the army to bring de la Puente down," a villager told me, "but he never came. We learned the next day that the soldiers had borrowed some shovels and then the radio announcement came that eight guerrillas had been killed in battle."

It was not until last June 18 that the army announced that the insurgency was at an end and gave its official toll of dead in the year of fighting: thirty-eight. The army dispatch appended a note of caution to Peruvians to "beware of subversion."

It was not idle advice. An American sociologist working with peasants in La Convención told me: "Though the conditions for guerrilla insurrection do not now exist. they may in two or three years. Nearly all the land distributed so far consists of two-acre marginal plots on steep valley slopes that are good for only one good crop every three years. Besides that, coffee prices continue falling. And the valley just doesn't have enough good laid to go around."

The popular Belaúnde, elected in 1968 on promises of reform, said nothing last year when the government's agrarian-reform budget was cut by 17.5 per cent, virtually eliminating any possibility that the lagging land-distribution program would gain momentum soon. Backed by a curious combination of profiteers and left-wing idealists, Belaúnde has presided by yielding to the moment's strongest pressures without risking his prestige to fight for the real advances that he promised.

This reluctance to press for reforms apparently shaved away sonic of his support in last fall's municipal elections. In his home city of Arequipa, for instance, the extreme Left ran its own slate of candidates and made a strong showing. At the other end of the political spectrum, some voters still traumatized by the guerrilla insurrection switched their support from

Belaúnde's Popular Action-Christian Democratic alliance to the conservative opposition. The Christian Democrats, in turn, have suffered a Right-Left split.

For the moment, the Communist there is comfort in the knowledge that the wider plan to foment wars of national liberation in Latin America can be plagued with more mistakes than the democratic efforts to oppose it. While the Communists of Peru are badly splintered and have failed to find a way to the hearts and minds of the peasants, a democratic régime has found an effective way to oppose a guerrilla insurgency. The government, however, has not yet met the real test— alleviating the social tensions generated by a long-quiescent Indian culture now insistently seeking incorporation into the material civilization of the West.