

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Narco-terror versus development

Presidential frontrunner Fujimori would fight drugs by turning the coca region into a national breadbasket.

On April 7, on the eve of Peru's presidential elections, the country's largest anti-drug military base, located in the coca-dominated Upper Huallaga Valley, was the target of a suicidal narco-terrorist assault. Nearly 200 Shining Path terrorists, wielding rocket-propelled grenade-launchers and claiming to be defending the rights of the region's coca-growers, engaged in a furious two-hour firefight with defenders of the U.S.-built Santa Lucia Base. Five hundred Peruvian soldiers fought alongside some 30 Americans—agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and civilian helicopter pilots contracted by the U.S. State Department—to repel the attack.

The combined Peruvian-American defense included the use of flares and helicopter reconnaissance flights to pinpoint the location of the attackers, and machine-gun fire from American-piloted Huey gunships on loan from Washington. When the dust had cleared, some 60 terrorists were reportedly dead and another 70 wounded. An American official at the base told the press, "Since January, we've been knocking out a good-sized lab every two or three days. During the same time, we knocked out 40 to 50 clandestine airstrips." The Santa Lucia base was built one year ago by the DEA at a cost of \$3 million. Its perimeter is fortified by watchtowers and electronically activated mines.

The Shining Path assault was intended as much to destroy the anti-drug base as to force an international incident—the death of an American, perhaps—which would have either

forced an American pullout from the region, or, more insidiously, the threat of a U.S. troop deployment into Peru. In the latter case, Shining Path would be handed a *raison de guerre* and would move to plunge the country—possibly the entire Andean region—into civil war.

In the aftermath of the assault, it has been reported in the U.S. media that the State Department is now planning the construction of several similar anti-drug bases in Peru during the next four to five years. Presidential frontrunner Alberto Fujimori has stated his willingness to allow foreign military advisers to assist the Peruvian military in its anti-terrorist operations, but is explicit that their active participation in those operations would be strictly forbidden. He added, "We will need to put much more emphasis on the military, but also on the social aspects of fighting subversion."

In an April 13 press conference to international journalists, Fujimori was more specific: "Those who think that terrorism can be eliminated solely through a military offensive have a myopic, incorrect concept. It is impossible to maintain a country with one-third of its starving population in a state of critical poverty, with 50% of its children in a state of malnutrition, and with 1,500,000 Peruvians completely illiterate. . . . You have to give the peasants an alternative; otherwise they will die of hunger or join the ranks of the guerrillas." He also proposed an Andean development program to bring schools, roads, health clinics, and impartial justice to rural Peruvians.

Fujimori was sharply critical of the U.S. war on drugs. "The DEA's eradication program has been ineffective, since in five years 5,000 hectares of coca crops have been eradicated, but simultaneously that crop has spread to 100,000 hectares." He urged promotion of rice, corn, and other food crops throughout the coca region of Peru, while noting that a major problem "is that there are no adequate means of transportation for these products."

Fujimori then proposed that if Washington were truly serious about fighting drugs, it would help Peru to construct a 350-mile railroad through the Upper Huallaga Valley, to convert that region into a "breadbasket" that could end the malnutrition that plagues the majority of Peru's population, while providing growers with an alternative vocation.

Fujimori's proposals, clearly popular with the Peruvian electorate, have nonetheless prompted derisive and racist responses from the camp of another presidential contender, Mario Vargas Llosa, and from those in the U.S. who backed his campaign, which lost heavily in the first round of Peru's elections on April 8. Vargas Llosa spokesman Enrique Chirinos Soto called Fujimori a "witchdoctor," who offers "miraculous prescriptions" for the economy, and Vargas Llosa's colleague Gustavo Gorriti wrote in the April 17 *Washington Times* that Peru's "poor, desperate, uncertainty-filled people" turned to Fujimori as to an "acupuncturist" promising instant cures. The *Washington Post* contrasted Fujimori's scatter-shot programmatic proposals to Vargas Llosa's detailed plans for shock austerity, and suggested that Fujimori was a coward for his failure to promise "the privatization of Peru's most bloated state enterprises," as Vargas Llosa has done.