

Peruvian hostage crisis exposes poverty

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THE CREAM of Lima's political elite were present to celebrate the birthday of Japan's emperor when several of the waiters – instead of serving the caviar – reached for their AK47s, revealing themselves as members of the guerrilla group.

They soon announced their demands: the release of their comrades from President Fujimori's jails and a programme of aid to relieve the impoverished Peruvian masses. They also highlighted, in front of the world's media, the horrendous conditions endured by political prisoners inside Peru's prisons.

For logistical reasons and as part of a 'hearts and minds' campaign, the MRTA released over 400 of their reluctant guests during the first weeks. They whittled down their collection of worthies to 74 – all key Peruvian government ministers, members of parliament and the judiciary, as well as army and police officials.

The MRTA is the lesser known of Peru's two main guerrilla groups. Sendero Luminoso (SL) or 'Shining Path' dominated the headlines in the 1980s until the capture of its leaders – Chairman Gonzalo (Abimael Guzman) and seven other central committee members – in 1992. That event, which was closely followed by a major split in the organisation, led to a dramatic disruption of SL's military capabilities.

The MRTA was formed in 1984. While Sendero looked to Mao's China, the MRTA found its inspiration in the Cuba of Che Guevara and his guerrilla strategy of creating 'one, two, many Vietnams' in the Latin America of the 1960s. The MRTA were less sectarian to the mass popular organisations of resistance (trade unions, left parties, community groups) that were not under their leadership.

Sendero, in contrast, considered all popular groups outside their control as 'revisionists' and no better than accomplices of the Peruvian state. Hence, their leaders were fair game for assassination and many peasant leaders, trade union activists and left personalities, along with MRTA members, were killed by SL. The MRTA's first armed actions were in 1987 and its influence spread during the next four years in the interior. Typical actions have included raiding food and clothing supplies and redistributing them to the poor, bank hold-ups and spectacular prison escapes. Like SL, the MRTA sought to establish a stable popular base for its actions in the coca producing Andean highlands where desperate peasants produced the raw material for the drug barons to process.

Whereas Sendero dominated the Upper Huallaga Valley region, the MRTA rooted themselves in the Central Huallaga area as well as setting up important bases in the north-east jungle department of Junin and along the north coast.

On 5 November 1987 they captured the 20,000 strong provincial city of Juanjui, locked up local police and ensured their deeds were prominently broadcast on national television.

In 1989 and 1991 the MRTA temporarily took over several towns. In Huallaga it extended protection to coca producers under attack from both 'narco-barons' and the Peruvian authorities. They supported a major peasant strike in 1989.

The 1990 election of Alberto Fujimori as president soon shifted the balance of forces towards the government. Elected as a 'populist' against a right wing neo-liberal opponent, Fujimori promised to end the hyper-inflation (then running at over 7,000%!) and crack down on the guerrilla insurgency.

Repression against the peasants was stepped up and special counter-insurgency units were established. Politically motivated murders rose to 150 a month in Fujimori's first year. Then in April 1992, in a coup against the elected Congress, Fujimori effectively governed with the military, who were given free rein to wage terror against the urban poor and peasants in the name of 'countering terrorism' and Fujimori became a born again neo-liberal.

Like the rest of the left in Peru, the MRTA's effectiveness, numbers and support all declined. By the time they invited themselves to the Japanese embassy celebrations it was thought the MRTA had no more than 500 armed members left in Peru.

Socialists and anti-imperialists all over the world should refuse to join in the chorus of condemnation against the MRTA. Their action has focused world attention on the appalling consequences of IMF-backed economic policies in Peru and the brutal repression necessary to impose it. Fujimori's policies of privatisation, deregulation and mass sackings in the state sector have devastated the domestic economy and living standards.

Peru's return to price stability, with inflation down to 10%, has been paid for by the masses. The IMF's 'strong currency' policies have led to soaring import prices and plummeting savings, mass unemployment and low wages. At the same time, the multinationals and Fujimori's backers in the bourgeoisie have made a killing, buying up state assets at knock-down prices and wringing huge profits from a super-exploited and increasingly unprotected labour force.

Socialists should support the demand for the release of all political prisoners from Peru's jails, not just those of the MRTA as the guerrillas first called for. But the MRTA's call for aid to the people is vague and insufficient. Where is the money to come from? Who is to dispense it?

Alleviating poverty must go hand-in-hand with taking power and wealth away from the multinationals and Peruvian bourgeoisie and placing it in the hands of the masses. The expropriation of the main companies, banks and all privatised state assets is essential, as is the refusal to pay the debts held by the IMF and foreign banks.

With such resources available, a massive programme of public works under the control of trade union and neighbourhood committees could really alleviate poverty and unemployment. Alongside this, a minimum wage/benefit of US\$1,000 is essential in today's Peru if the majority are to sustain anything like adequate levels of food and shelter at today's prices.

While the hostage crisis has served to highlight the repression and injustices of Fujimori's regime, ultimately the secret and isolated guerrilla actions of the MRTA will not overthrow it. Only a revival of the united action of the mass organisations of the working class and poor peasants - the trade unions, self-defence groups and neighbourhood committees - which flourished between 1977 and 1988 - can do that.

But this time they must be welded into a force that can disarm the military, disperse the corrupt Congress and establish a government of the workers and peasants For this we need a new revolutionary socialist party in Peru.