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RELATIVES SEEK JUSTICE AS PERU'S LARGEST MASS GRAVE IS EXHUMED



Putis, Peru: The exhumation of Peru's largest mass grave has opened a window on Peru's shadowy war against terrorism in the Andes, and encouraged indigenous families who lost relatives to demand justice and reparations.

The exhumation was completed last Thursday at the remote village of Putis, high in the Peruvian Andes. Braving freezing conditions and narco-traffickers, a team from the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF) spent two weeks extracting almost 60 skeletons and the remains of about 10 more bodies from a shallow grave.

Ash Kosiewicz, a Peace Fellow from the Advocacy Project (AP) who is serving as a Peace Fellow with EPAF, and Iain Guest, Executive Director of AP, spent several days at the site.

The Putis exhumation is the largest of its kind in Peru's history. Jose Pablo Baraybar, the director of EPAF, predicted that it would accelerate efforts to investigate the fate of more than 15,000 Peruvians who disappeared between 1982 and 2000. Most of the victims are thought to have been buried in clandestine graves, but only 505 had been retrieved before last week.

Putis is located in the province of Ayacucho in southern Peru, which bore the brunt of a brutal campaign between the Peruvian Army and Shining Path guerrillas. The victims were Quechua-speaking Indians who were isolated and marginalized, and this has made it hard for their families to lobby for justice.

Identifying the dead, said Mr. Baraybar, would help them to claim the rights enjoyed by other Peruvians. "They have to be assisted to recover their citizenship and use the same tools that the state gives all of us to advocate."

Last week's exhumation may have begun the process. Gerardo Fernandez Mendoza, who heads an association of 250 Putis relatives, told a press conference that 430 victims were

buried in 14 clandestine graves in the area and that once the bodies are recovered reparations must be paid. “We need health centers and schools. Our livelihood was taken away from us.”

The Putis massacre occurred after hundreds of villagers were displaced from their homes in late 1984, and rounded up by soldiers. A group of 123 villagers were taken to Putis where they were shot on December 13, 1984. The largest grave, which was uncovered last week, is thought to contain 76 bodies.

The exhumation recovered over 70 bullet casings, including some in the grave which may have come from an officer’s sidearm. This suggests that victims were shot at close range. Many were children, including babies.

Some forty relatives walked for hours through the mountains last Thursday to visit the gravesite and provide DNA samples which will now be matched with the bones recovered by EPAF. Many relatives wept at their first sight of the grave and pointed to fragments of clothing which seemed familiar. They said a communal prayer before leaving.

Guillermina Quispe Coronado, who lost 13 family members in the Putis massacre, said she was distressed to see the remains but hopeful that her relatives can now be buried in peace. “We thought that no-one was interested,” she said.

The relatives are determined to seek justice, and there was at least one eyewitness to the massacre. But any criminal investigation by the prosecutor’s office will probably meet resistance from the Army, which has refused to provide the names of those operating around Putis in late 1984.

Meanwhile, EPAF expects to resume exhumations within the month at four other grave-sites in Putis. The work will likely become harder as winter approaches, and security is also a concern. Last week, a fire-fight was narrowly avoided when a group of armed narco-traffickers passed by the EPAF compound at night and almost ran into an army patrol.

EPAF team has drawn praise for working in such difficult conditions. Cristina Olazabal, a deputy prosecutor for Ayacucho, described the exhumation as “professional and disciplined.”

Greg Maggio, a senior official from the US State Department who also attended the exhumation, praised the sensitivity with which EPAF dealt with family members. Mr. Maggio works in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, which has funded the Putis exhumation.

- View [video footage](#) of the exhumation
- Read the [blogs of Ash Kosiewicz](#)

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