

## Army Base In Peru Yields Secrets, Galvanizes Advocates For The Disappeared

Washington, March 22: Forensic scientists have identified the bodies of three Peruvians who disappeared thirty years ago at a notorious army base in Southern Peru, breathing new life into efforts to account for over 15,000 people who disappeared in Peru's dirty war against terrorism.

The three bodies were among 53 recovered from the base of Los Cabitos, in the province of Ayacucho. They were identified by the [Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team \(EPAF\)](#), a long-time partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).



Jose Pablo Baraybar from EPAF after his testimony before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

"The expectations are huge," he said. "This could be the tip of the iceberg."

Mr. Baraybar spoke from Washington, where he testified last Saturday before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights alongside advocates from Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico. They told Commissioners that over 107,000 persons have disappeared in the four countries, and called on the Commission to create a permanent unit to monitor disappearances.

The disappearances in Peru have attracted less attention than elsewhere on the Continent because most of the victims were from Quechua-speaking Indian communities who lived outside the mainstream of Peruvian society. But the impact was devastating and it has worsened as efforts to identify the dead and prosecute the guilty have stalled.

Los Cabitos served as a center for the army's counterinsurgency efforts between 1980 and 2000, and by some estimates may hold over 600 bodies. Information about the identifications became known on Wednesday at the trial of army commanders who oversaw operations in Ayacucho in the 1980s.

Jose Pablo Baraybar, the director of EPAF, predicted that the identifications would prompt deep anguish and an outpouring of demand from relatives.

Peru's Truth Commission concluded that 8,558 Peruvians disappeared, but estimates today put the number at well over 15,000. According to Mr. Baraybar, only 117 victims (0.8%) have been identified. They include 29 bodies that were exhumed by EPAF at the village of Putis in 2008. [AP attended the Putis exhumation](#) - the largest in Peru's history - and helped EPAF reach out to relatives of the dead.



**EPAF's work: One of the 92 victims exhumed at Putis in 2008. Many were children**

Since Putis, efforts by civil society to demand accountability have met with stubborn resistance from the state. Peruvian courts have prosecuted 199 individuals in connection with the dirty war, including former President Alberto Fujimori, but [acquitted 133](#). The courts threw out one recent case because plaintiffs were unable to show signs of torture after 29 years. Another case was dropped because of the lack of written orders from military commanders. The prosecutor's office has also imposed time constraints on cases which make it more difficult to secure a judgement. Added to all this, several long-time donors have stopped funding transitional justice in Peru.

EPAF hopes that its breakthrough at Los Cabitos will trigger new funding and enable civil society to address the needs of more families. The work at Los Cabitos was financed through a special earmark from the US Senate after lobbying by EPAF's allies in Washington including AP, the [Washington Office for Latin America](#) (WOLA), and the organization Creative Learning.



**A mother displays a photo of her disappeared son. His remains were exhumed in 2011 from a mass grave in the remote community of Umasi Apongo, Ayacucho**

By joining advocates from Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala, EPAF also hopes to present a united front at the Inter-American Commission. The Commission has played a key role in putting disappearances on the international agenda, but the witnesses were critical of Commissioners following last week's hearing. After flying to Washington at their own expense they were given seven minutes each to speak and asked cursory questions.

"After telling them about all of this bad practice, they asked us for examples of good practice," said Doria Yanette Bautista Montanez, whose sister has disappeared in Colombia. "We practically cried when we heard that question."

Although Ms. Montanez and the others hope that the Commission will step up its work on disappearances,

the Commission is under growing pressure from Ecuador and other governments over its human rights work, particularly on freedom of expression. The US has limited leverage in the dispute because it has not ratified the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights.

*AP's Director Iain Guest wrote a book on the disappearances and in recent days he has been [contacted by media outlets](#) about the role of Pope Francis in Argentina's dirty war. Mr Guest replies that the Catholic Church was complicit by its silence and that a forceful intervention from the Vatican might have slowed the killing. The military Junta was sensitive to international opinion - one reason why it resorted to clandestine killings.*

- Watch AP's Video "[If I Don't Come Back, Look For Me In Putis](#)"
- Visit the [blogs and vlogs of Ash Kosiewicz](#), who served as a Peace fellow at EPAF in 2008 and attended the Putis exhumation
- For statistics on prosecutions visit the [Human Rights Trials in Peru](#) project.