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UN to Peru - Find the Disappeared and Protect their Families

A prominent UN working group has called on the government of Peru to show more urgency in identifying thousands of Peruvians who disappeared during Peru's 20-year war against terrorism (1980-2000) and in meeting the needs of surviving family members.



Keeping the faith: Peruvian relatives seek answers

Following a mission to Peru, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has urged the government to pass a new law, map clandestine graves, accelerate prosecutions, protect memorial sites, establish a DNA database, and broaden reparations for relatives of the disappeared, particularly widows.

Speaking in Lima on June 10, Ariel Dulitzky, the group chairman, praised the government for establishing a Vice-Ministry for Human Rights and ratifying the International Convention on

disappearances. But, he warned, "deep wounds" still remain: "Thirty years have passed since the first disappearances. The relatives of the victims, witnesses and even the perpetrators are dying. It is necessary to respond immediately to the cries for justice, reparations and memory."

The impact has been greatest on Indian communities in the provinces of Ayacucho and Huanuco, which were mercilessly treated by the Army and guerrillas alike and account for 75% of those who disappeared.

The [UN recommendations](#) drew heavily on a submission from the [Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team \(EPAF\)](#), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) and a leading human rights advocate in Peru. AP was present in 2008 when [EPAF exhumed 92 bodies in the village of Putis](#) - the largest exhumation ever conducted by civil society in Peru.

The UN group pointed out that the number of disappearances still remains in dispute, twelve years after the much-praised report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The official registry lists 8,661 names, but EPAF alone has collected 13,271.



Victims of a dirty war: EPAF exhumed 92 bodies at Putis

The group is also critical of the government's efforts to locate and identify the missing. Between 2002 and 2015, 3,202 bodies were exhumed and 1,644 restored to families, but they included many who were not listed as disappeared. The group visited one laboratory in Ayacucho which had no DNA analysis and was pitifully short of resources.

Human remains are scattered across Peru in clandestine graves, but few have been investigated and little effort has been made to protect vital evidence. The UN group cited the area of La Hoyada in Ayacucho, where hundreds of Peruvians disappeared in a former army base. 109 bodies have been recovered from La Hoyada, but only 4 have been identified. Meanwhile the protected area has shrunk from 14 hectares to just 4, jeopardizing the collection of evidence. According to EPAF, the human rights office in Ayacucho closed 1,335 cases in 2013 due to missing evidence.

The group's most forceful comments come on behalf of families of the missing. Instead of expecting relatives to initiate investigations, said the group, the government should take urgent "humanitarian" steps to broaden reparations and provide medical, education and even psychological support. Widows are particularly in need.

It remains to be seen how the government will respond. The UN group has now visited Peru three times and submitted 2,371 disappearances to the government for explanation

but one case has been resolved. Still, the group serves as a voice of conscience and a lifeline for the families and their advocates.



Creating memory: Relatives of the disappeared remember their loved ones through embroidery

In addition, while the political establishment in Peru has obstructed progress on disappearances, part of the problem is caused by a lack of trained personnel and resources.

This presents an opportunity to EPAF. Blocked from conducting exhumations in Peru, EPAF has moved to training and advising other governments including Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, the Congo, Somaliland and Nepal. Work also continues in Peru. This week, EPAF will

open a field school for practitioners of transitional justice in Ayacucho, helped by [Mariel Sanchez, EPAF's Peace Fellow](#).

Meanwhile, in the US, American quilters are heeding the UN's call to "create memory" by assembling over 30 squares that carry the names of Peruvians who disappeared in Ayacucho and were lovingly knitted by relatives (photo). The quilts will be exhibited in July at the [Long Beach Island Foundation for the Arts and Sciences](#) in New Jersey.

- Watch AP's video of [the 2008 exhumation at Putis](#)
- Read the UN group's [2014 global report](#) on disappearances.
- Follow Mariel's [photos of Peru](#) on Flickr.

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