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FORENSIC TEAM TRACKS DISAPPEARED PERUVIANS AS FUJIMORI RETURNS TO FACE JUSTICE

October 2, 2007, Lima, Peru and Washington, DC: A Peruvian team of forensic scientists is insisting that the Peruvian government delegate authority to civil society to locate and identify thousands of Peruvians who went missing during two decades of internal conflict.

The case was made recently at a briefing in Washington for the Advocacy Project (AP) by Jose Pablo Baraybar, Director of the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF). Mr. Baraybar was accompanied by officials from Creative Learning, a 501(c) 3 organization in Washington that is supporting EPAF's work in the United States.

Mr. Baraybar spoke one day before the former Peruvian President, Alberto Fujimori, was flown back to Peru to face possible trial for widespread human rights abuses, including disappearances, that occurred during his 10-year presidency.

EPAF has documented over 13,000 disappearances – almost 4,000 more than the estimate of the 2003 Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission – and warned that the number will continue to rise.

Mr. Baraybar said that most of the missing had been kidnapped by the Peruvian security forces, which used disappearances in their counter-insurgency operations and even wrote the practice into manuals. Still, he said, the Peruvian government has shown a complete lack of leadership on the issue. A consolidated list of the missing has yet to be compiled, and reports about clandestine graves – said to number over 3,000 – are not followed up.

Until the facts are known and bodies returned, relatives of the missing will be unable to come to terms with their loss, said Mr. Baraybar: “We must investigate the crimes of the past to build peace in the future.”

While the Peruvian government should provide overall guidance, said Mr. Baraybar, the tasks of exhuming bodies, identifying remains and informing relatives should be left to specialists like EPAF.

EPAF was set up in 1997 and is one of several Latin American forensic teams that investigate the abuses of former regimes. The teams are renowned for using science to advocate for relatives of the missing, and several of their members, including Mr. Baraybar, have lent their expertise to the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague.

EPAF's work has acquired added significance following the recent extradition to Peru of Mr. Fujimori, who was President of Peru when most of the disappearances occurred. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Fujimori regime used death squads to eliminate suspected terrorists.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission estimated in 2003 that more than 69,000 Peruvians had died in the violence and at least 8,500 had disappeared. According to the Commission, most of those missing were poor, Quechua-Speaking Indians. Almost half lived in the Department of Ayacucho.

The figures shocked Peruvians, but EPAF now suggests they are an under-estimate. The EPAF team is also uncovering new cases in isolated areas of three departments – Ayacucho, Huanuco and Junin – that were barely investigated by the Commission. This, says EPAF, is a strong argument for strengthening the forensic capacity of civil society.

Many Peruvians want to put the past behind them and enjoy the country's booming economy, but they have been reminded of the disappearances by a series of sensational disclosures by former death squad members. The problem for EPAF and human rights advocates is that the government's follow-up to such charges has been under-funded and lacking in direction. This has hampered efforts to bring the killers to justice. Only 60 cases are currently before the courts.

One case under investigation concerns the Army Base of Los Cabitos, in Ayacucho, where over 500 people are thought to have been killed. Fifteen bodies have been found and prosecutors are prepared to issue indictments, but the case is hampered by the lack of rigorous forensic data. EPAF is now seeking \$6,000 to use detection dogs from a California-based Institution to seek out clandestine graves on the base. Creative Learning is coordinating the appeal in the United States.

Eventually, EPAF would like to see a partnership between the Peruvian government and civil society to carry out forensic work, such as exists in Guatemala, and a vigorous national program to determine the whereabouts of those missing and return the remains to their families.

Meanwhile, EPAF is creating a database and systematically collecting ante-mortem information on the disappeared, including the clothes they wore, that will help identification. EPAF has also developed software to record information from relatives.

Mr. Baraybar described identification as a "humanitarian service" for relatives who "should not be held hostage to the long process of justice." Recovering, identifying and returning the remains of those missing "does not prevent justice being served on its own terms or at its own pace" he said.

The Advocacy Project has agreed to build a web page for EPAF on the AP website that will hopefully evolve into EPAF's own website, to be used in EPAF's advocacy.

- * For more information on EPAF, contact epafperu@epafperu.org or Jose Pablo Baraybar: baraybar@epafperu.org
- * To help cover the cost of using detection dogs in the Los Cabitos investigation, contact Carola Mandelbaum: CarolaM@creativelearning.org

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