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FORENSIC TEAM SEEKS TO EXHUME 120 VICTIMS OF PERU'S DIRTY WAR



Putis, Peru: A forensic team in Peru is preparing to identify over 120 victims of a 1984 massacre by the Peruvian military, and in the process provide some answers for families of those who “disappeared” during 20 years of violent internal conflict.

The Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP), was appointed last week by a special prosecutor in the province of Ayacucho to investigate several mass graves in the community of Putis, Ayacucho.

For the next two weeks, a team of about 15 EPAF scientists and staff members will work at a remote mountain site 11,483 feet (3,500 meters) above sea level, exhuming remains from a pit thought to contain about 80 bodies.

EPAF is independent of the government. Jose Pablo Baraybar, Director of EPAF, said the investigation could open the door to more civil society participation in identifying those who disappeared between 1980 and 2000. It could also lead to legal action to bring justice to victims’ relatives.

“We hope that this will attract more intervention...pushing the state, in a way, to fulfill their obligation to the victims,” said Mr. Baraybar. “They’ve been dragging their feet for a very long time. There’s no strategy in the search for the missing.”

An estimated 69,000 Peruvians lost their lives during the long and violent struggle between two insurgent groups (the Shining Path and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Army) and the Peruvian government. More than 15,000 of the victims disappeared, and of these many were targeted by

the police and armed forces. Former Peruvian President Alberto K. Fujumori is currently on trial for authorizing two massacres in the early 1990s.

In the four years since the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued its report, the government has only recovered only 505 bodies and identified 269, according to the Institute of Forensic Medicine, a division of the prosecutor's office. The Commission estimated that there are more than 4,000 clandestine burial sites in Peru.

Almost half of the deaths and disappearances reported to the Commission took place in the Andean Department of Ayacucho and one of the worst incidents took place at Putis. The Commission found that in December 1984, 123 men, women and children from the communities of Cayramayo, Vizcatampata, Orcohuasi and Putis were executed by units of the Peruvian Army.

According to testimony given to the Commission, soldiers from the military base of Putis gathered the villagers – many of whom had hidden in the mountains for fear of rebel attacks – and convinced them to move to Putis, where they could create a new settlement.

The soldiers gathered the men at gunpoint and ordered them to dig a hole behind the church, telling them it would become a trout farm. Eighty villagers were shot without explanation and interred in the hole. The rest were gathered into small groups, killed and buried in five graves. The villagers were apparently suspected of involvement with the Shining Path, but the soldiers were also motivated by profit because they sold cattle belonging to their victims.

The Putis site was brought to the attention of prosecutors again last year after a pig farmer in the area found his animals digging up human remains. EPAF offered its services after government officials proved reluctant to investigate the site because of poor security.

The cost of the excavation and DNA testing is being covered by a grant from the Latin American Initiative for the Identification of the Disappeared funded by the US Department of State (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor - DRL). EPAF has collected ante-mortem information on 76 Putis victims, including names, age, sex, physical characteristics and descriptions of clothing. This information will be used along with DNA testing to identify the victims.

The Putis investigation is receiving support from several groups, including Paz y Esperanza (Peace and Hope), a Peruvian human rights organization which is legally representing the families and assisting in the collection of data; Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos (The Peruvian Coordinating Board of Human Rights Organizations); the Office of Missing Persons of the Regional Government of Ayacucho; Creative Learning, a nonprofit organization in Washington; and The Advocacy Project, which has recruited a Peace Fellow, Ash Kosiewicz from Georgetown University, to volunteer with EPAF this summer.

- Visit the [EPAF partner page](#)
- Read the [blog of Ash Kosiewicz](#), AP's Peace Fellow at EPAF.
- Read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's **final report** <http://www.cverdad.org.pe/ingles/ifinal/conclusiones.php>