

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Peru's terrorists assassinate priest

A new phase of the narco-terrorist warfare has begun, targeting the Catholic Church.

On Dec. 3, two terrorists entered a Catholic church in Ayacucho, Peru during mass, and, in front of the congregation, shot the priest in the back while he was officiating the mass. Terrorists had never dared kill a priest in Peru before, and his murder has shaken the country.

The priest was Father Víctor Acuña Cárdenas, a man who had played a central role in organizing resistance to the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) terrorists in Ayacucho, the terrorists' home base.

The murder opens a new phase in Soviet-backed narco-terrorist warfare against South and Central America, now taking aim at the institution of the Catholic Church itself. Not since 1980, when hired gunmen shot El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero in the back at the moment that he raised the chalice during mass, has the institution of the Church been so clearly the target of terrorism.

A parish priest for 20 years in Ayacucho, Father Acuña served as chaplain for the region's Civil Guard, and secretary of the Catholic aid association, Caritas International.

Acuña's program to provide food and housing for some 2,000 widows and children of men assassinated by Shining Path, had won him the respect of many among the Indian population of the region, which Shining Path has sought to control through terror. Thousands filed past his coffin in the days following his murder.

Peruvian Cardinal Juan Landázuri urged an end to the terrorist war: "I am disturbed and deeply pained by this abhorrent assassination, above all be-

cause Father Acuña was celebrating the Sacred Mass when he was shot in the back," he stated. The murder merits "the most absolute condemnation, along with the other assassinations committed over the past eight years, numbering 8,000 victims."

Pope John Paul II sent a telex to the Peruvian Church, expressing his distress at the killing, and his repudiation of the violence against the Christian spirit of Peruvians. The Papal Nuncio of Peru, Msgr. Luigi Dosena, carried the Pope's message to the funeral services in Ayacucho, and appealed to the Peruvian people to reject violence.

No group or individual claimed responsibility for the murder, but the killing was the first in a wave of slaughter carried out by Shining Path on Dec. 3 and 4, to "celebrate" the birthday of their founder Abimael Guzmán.

The governor of the province of Huanta in Ayacucho was assassinated the same day as Father Acuña. Twenty-four hours later, the mayor of Huancapi, located in Huanta province, was seriously wounded in a terrorist attack. The Huanta governor's burial took place in the midst of dynamite bombings of three high-tension towers in the area.

In Lima, police frustrated at least three terrorist attempts to blow up monuments, hotels, and factories in and around the capital city. In Chincha, just south of Lima, the chief of army recruitment was assassinated in his bed, while army 1st Sgt. Nilo Bazan Chavez was murdered in a Shining Path ambush of his car in Huancayo.

Various Shining Path apologists in media and political circles inside Peru tried to argue that it was the "right-wing" that murdered the priest, to set up the left.

But Shining Path's mouthpiece, *El Diario*, did all but claim the murder as their own. The paper on Dec. 4 "justified" the murder of Father Acuña by claiming that he lived with various women, and trafficked in Church donations.

That same day, the paper carried a full-page advertisement by Shining Path, toasting founder Guzmán's birthday with the pledge that violence should flourish. "We speak with lead, and offer our blood to write a new chapter in the history of our party and our people."

On Dec. 3, *El Diario* announced also that its extermination squads are now out for President Alan García. García has worked closely with the Catholic Church, both on efforts to end terrorism, and to change international economic policy to include moral principles.

El Diario also ran a photograph of President García under the headline, "Penal Judgment against Alan García's Genocide." The President's photograph carried a bull's-eye on his chest.

The terrorists' "legal" lobby has at the same time relaunched its campaign to blame President García for massacres of terrorist prisoners that occurred when police retook prisons which the terrorists had seized in June 1986.

García had defused the campaign at the time by denouncing the massacre and arresting those responsible, but a just-released report prepared by left-wing parliamentarians following their "investigation" of the events, revives the charge that President García bears the burden of blame.