

Gen. Hermoza: lessons we must never forget

The following are excerpts from the Aug. 21 speech of Peruvian Armed Forces Commander Gen. Nicolás Hermoza Ríos, upon leaving his command of that nation's Armed Forces.

. . . In 1990, Peru suffered the worst disaster of its history, led to an abyss by economic sanctions . . . practically bankrupted, sunk in the worst impoverishment ever experienced, which led in turn to the serious deterioration of national infrastructure, . . . triggering a crisis of values which cost us a great deal to reverse.

This was the situation in Peru, during which I assumed command of the Armed Forces, faced with an advancing terrorist opposition creating vacuums of power in every corner of the country, trying to purge all state presence through a frenzy of blood and violence against the Peruvian people, with the absurd aim of seizing power.

We all know of the selective assassinations in the cities, and the massive crimes in the countryside. Possibly the example of Peru ended up inspiring the world with a new concept of human rights, understood until then as the rights of the individual against the abuses of the state. In 1992, more than 40% of Peruvian territory was in a state of alert, with approximately 20,000 deaths, 50,000 orphans, 280,000 displaced, 258 destroyed bridges, with important cities of the country on the verge of being isolated for lack of electricity due to the destruction of more than 2,004 high-tension towers, and more than 200 political authorities assassinated. The population was pleading for an end to the unjustified crimes—but got no response. . . .

These are lessons we must never forget, because none of what we went through is past history. To forget, according to history, is anti-historic, suicidal. The peace and order we have today are not some natural, eternal, irreversible condition; especially in the jungle, our soldiers are still dying, fighting for a pacification which they are trying to consolidate.

In the fight against terrorism and narco-terrorism, we fulfilled our duty. . . . We faced an undeclared war, because it was preferable to answer to history, although ethically and legally all Peruvians should have assumed such responsibility during a state of siege, as was appropriate to the desperate moments in which organized society lived.

We deployed across Peru. The terrorist fire transcended the physical part of our territory, to embed itself, through intense and terrible fear, in the conscience of our people. The monstrosity of the acts of violence had penetrated so deeply into people's psychology, that in the course of things, we

soldiers also ended up being the gratuitous enemies of the people. Under these circumstances, another task was given our men: to recover the confidence of our compatriots.

We are forced to remember these events again, to remind our people that we soldiers were also the silent victims. From the testimony of thousands of soldiers killed in combat and assassinated, one can understand the damage that terrorism did to Peru. Only this lesson will prevent a return in Peru to a brutality which stained the very dignity of the nation.

Reminder of these events perhaps represents for some a past that we should have already buried. . . . For us, the uniformed men of the people, the fight for pacification will be the worthy reference point for lessons of life and dignity, which we must not forget, to prevent the tragedy of Peru from ever being repeated.

In 1995, before the wounds were even healed and while the strategic deployment and distribution of various elements of our forces were consolidating different missions related to terrorism and narco-terrorism, we had to leave the battlefields of internal combat to defend the nation's territorial integrity along the northern border. Once more, the Armed Forces had to deploy with the speed that circumstances dictated. . . .

We speak of law

For the Armed Forces, to guarantee sovereignty, independence, and the territorial integrity of the Republic is its primary objective. All of its military might is subject to the juridical order of the country, and to the constitutional power of the Republic. Our Armed Forces is an institution of men, with the maturity to combat terrorism under conditions more torturous and cruel than in a conventional war. That is why we do not have . . . the triumphalism to speak of weakness or force, but rather of law, which is the Reason whose foundations speak to the most profound feelings of solidarity and justice, which are factors without which it is impossible to stop all violent action capable of provoking instability and horror.

It is also necessary to say that on April 22, 1997, . . . all Peruvians were represented by that handful of soldiers who rescued the individuals held hostage by the terrorists, in the Chavin de Huantar military operation. And with their example, they demonstrated to the world the moral quality of our rulers, of the men, of the people, and of Peru's soldiers. With the sacrifice of Colonel Valer and of Captain Jiménez, not only was human security defended, but the concepts of human rights, of democracy, and of the state, were rescued for the world.

We move forward with a peaceful conscience, based on the knowledge of having complied, with all the effort and will we have been able to muster, with the duties imposed on us through our military obligations. To soldiers at every level of command, wherever you may find yourselves, I repeat: With men like you, Peru can do anything.

Long live Peru!