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69,000 Died or Disappeared in Peru Conflict, Panel Reports

By JUAN FORERO

IMA, Peru, Aug. 28 — Dissecting 20 years of conflict, a government-appointed truth commission issued a voluminous report today that concluded that a fanatical, Maoist rebel group was responsible for the greatest number of deaths but also blamed three governments for widespread human-rights abuses.

The report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission said that 69,000 people died or disappeared from 1980 to 2000, nearly triple earlier estimates. The commission said that three out of every four people who died or disappeared were Quechua-speaking Indians, civilians who the report said were caught between the military and a brutal guerrilla group intent on toppling the state.

The commission's report, the culmination of a two-year investigation based on nearly 17,000 individual testimonies from 530 remote villages and reams of documents, said that most victims lost their lives during the governments of Fernando Belaunde and Alan Garcia in the 1980's, two administrations that are widely considered democratic. Those governments were blamed for giving too much power to the military and then failing to stem a rising tide of abuses as some military units embarked on a scorched-earth campaign in Peru's isolated highlands.

But President Alberto Fujimori, whose 10-year rule ended in a corruption scandal in 2000, is singled out for particularly harsh criticism.

The report blamed his quasi-dictatorship for hijacking Peruvian democracy and implementing Draconian antiterrorism legislation. The government then waged a dirty war that allowed corruption to flourish, the report said. The intelligence service, headed by Mr. Fujimori's spy chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, was accused of tortures, drug trafficking and disappearances.

Though details of Peru's war with Shining Path and a smaller rebel group were generally known, the report today is the first to offer a comprehensive account of one of Latin America's most violent conflicts.

The report's nine volumes, thousands of pages long, provide intimate detail about the massacres in Indian villages, prison uprisings and the operation of a secret paramilitary unit called the Colina group. It also provides mind-numbing detail of the effects of the conflict: the widows and orphans left behind and the psychological effects wrought on a poor, isolated people long forgotten by the state.

The commission's work has enjoyed widespread support from both human rights groups and foreign governments, including the Bush administration, which helped finance its \$12 million effort.

Indeed, the commission was considered one of the most advanced in the world, having learned from the mishaps and shortcomings of similar commissions that have operated from South Africa to Nigeria and in many countries in the Western Hemisphere. Unlike those in other countries, the Peruvian commission investigated both military regimes and democratic governments.

In a first for Latin America, victims and their families testified openly in community forums, and hundreds of major figures were interviewed by investigators. They included Mr. Garcia, who remains a candidate for president, and Abimael Guzman, the former leader of Shining Path, who is in jail.

The commission has also forwarded to judicial authorities evidence collected in more than 60 cases in which the state security apparatus was involved in torture, disappearances and massacres, said *Ciro Alegria Varona*, who headed the commission's investigation into the involvement of the armed forces. Many of those cases are already under investigation, *Mr. Alegria* said in an interview today, but the Truth Commission collected additional evidence that prosecutors could use. The names of the accused violators, more than 100 in all, will not be released.

"It is a turning-over of information, but also with a recommendation that they look into it," *Mr. Alegria* said.

Judicial authorities here said they would carefully review the evidence.

"Yes, we need to punish; it has to be done," Supreme Court Chief Justice *Hugo Sivina* told reporters on Wednesday.

Some retired military officers and conservative politicians, particularly those with close ties to *Mr. Fujimori*, have accused the commission's 12 members of favoring the rebels at a time when remnants of Shining Path have been stirring in the highlands.

"The rebels have had influence in the Truth Commission," said *German Parra*, a former general and a leading member of a group representing retired general and admirals. "The terrorists wanted to destroy the society, the state, and committed acts of terrorism. The military did commit some excesses, but what they were doing was defending the state."

Other critics have gone so far as to accuse the Truth Commission of close ties with Shining Path.

"All of those commissioners have been communists," said *Rafael Rey*, a conservative congressman. "What right do they have to say that this general or that colonel or major or captain should be criminally charged?"

Most Peruvians, though, support the commission's work, polls show.

The commission laid the blame for the conflict and many of its most barbarous acts on Shining Path, which began its war in 1980 and was largely wiped out in the mid-1990's after Mr. Guzman, a university professor, was captured. Mr. Guzman comes across in the report as an uncompromising revolutionary who pushed his followers to lay down their lives but rarely risked his own.

"There is a clear finding that he is the author of the violence over 20 years," said Francisco Soberon, executive secretary of the National Human Rights Coordinator, an umbrella group that has provided documents to the Truth Commission. "There is no benevolence toward him."

The report says the violence perpetrated by Shining Path was institutional, as the group "took its fundamentalist ideology and totalitarian organization to its extreme."

The report says 54 percent of all deaths in the conflict were caused by Shining Path. Mr. Alegria said 30 percent were caused by the armed forces and most of the rest by government-backed peasant militias. The report said that only 1.5 percent of the deaths were caused by a smaller rebel group, the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement.

While Lima and other cities were hit hard by terror bombings, 85 percent of all deaths took place in Ayacucho province and five other states in the Andean highlands.

The report says that Shining Path terrorized Quechua-speaking Indians in its efforts to drum up support for its efforts to topple the government. The army, suspicious of Indian support for the rebels, responded with a savage campaign that killed thousands.

"Remember, the violence happened in the most isolated areas, to the poorest of all Peruvians," said Ernesto de la Jara, director of the human rights group, the Institute of Legal Defense, in Lima. "Very few people even complained."

The commission recommends reparations, even if symbolic in this poor country, and its members have said the government should exhume dozens of mass graves.

The commission, appointed by interim President Valentin Paniagua after Mr. Fujimori fled to self-imposed exile in Japan, was created so Peru could reconcile with its past. Like other countries, Peru came to the conclusion that it was not practical or realistic to expect expensive, time-consuming trials.

For many victims of violence, the commission's work was crucial. But it is still considered only a first step, in part because many bodies are still missing.

"It is not easy to reconcile until there is justice, until we know what happened to our relatives," said Angelica Mendoza, leader of a group of mothers and wives of men who

disappeared. "The commission's work is done, but we will continue to fight until we know the truth."

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