

December 18, 1996

Peru Rebels Raid Envoy's Home And Seize Hundreds of Hostages

LIMA, Peru, Wednesday, Dec. 18— Dressed as waiters bearing champagne and hors d'oeuvres, about 30 guerrillas slipped into a party at the Japanese Ambassador's house on Tuesday night, then set off explosions and took as hostages hundreds of diplomats and government officials.

Police officers with assault rifles surrounded the residential compound in the expensive San Isidro district of Lima, and crouched behind their cars as gunfire was heard coming from inside. Witnesses saw smoke and tracer bullets.

From inside the compound, the Japanese Ambassador, Morihisa Aoki, called a local radio station. "There are no injured, nothing, and we are safe," he said. But he added, "For the moment, I cannot speak freely."

The Japanese Foreign Ministry in Tokyo estimated that at least 600 people were attending the party to celebrate the birthday of Emperor Akihito of Japan. A local television station, citing the Japanese Ambassador, reported that 800 people were inside.

The attackers drove into the compound dressed as waiters and unloaded food and champagne, the police said. They then apparently set off at least one large explosion and two minor ones as they took control of the embassy compound just after 8 P.M.

The rebels, who according to the police numbered about 30, identified themselves as members of the Tupac Amaru guerrilla movement and demanded the release of imprisoned comrades.

"What we are asking is the liberation of all of our comrades, who are being mistreated and tortured in the dungeons of the various prisons," said a guerrilla who identified himself as Comandante Mejia Huerta.

Many leaders of the Tupac Amaru are in jail. Its chief, Victor Polay, was captured in June 1992 and is serving a life sentence, as is his lieutenant, Peter Cardenas. Other top commanders conceded defeat and surrendered in July 1993.

Government and Red Cross officials reportedly were negotiating with the rebels, and President Alberto K. Fujimori convened an emergency meeting of his Cabinet.

In a telephone call to the Japanese station NHK, the Ambassador said the rebels were "completely armed" and wanted to talk with President Fujimori.

"It seems that after releasing the women and elderly, they are going to negotiate with President Fujimori about the conditions to release us," Mr. Aoki said. He was allowed to speak only in Spanish, and said he was not allowed to say how many rebels were in the compound.

In the hours after the attack, the rebels released more than 50 women, including Mr. Fujimori's sister Juana.

The radio station Radioprogramas reported that Mr. Fujimori's mother was also among those released, but the report could not be confirmed.

A witness who could see into the residence through binoculars from a taller building nearby told Radioprogramas that he could see armed men crouched behind bushes inside the compound. He also saw guests apparently lying face down.

Among the guests were the Peruvian Foreign Minister, Francisco Tudela, and the Ambassadors from Brazil, Bolivia and Cuba, according to a Peruvian Congressman, Henry Pease, who left the party shortly before the attack. Jose Munoz, a security guard with the Venezuelan Embassy, said that country's Ambassador was also inside.

Mr. Fujimori, who is of Japanese ancestry, was not at the party. The United States Ambassador, Dennis Jett, also was not inside, his embassy said.

The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, which draws its ideology from Fidel Castro's Cuban revolutionaries, took up arms in 1984. It has always been second in importance in to the Maoist Shining Path, and even at its height had fewer than 1,000 fighters. According to some estimates, only a few hundred armed followers remain.

Just over a year ago, the police raided a Lima safe house and arrested more than a dozen Tupac Amaru rebels. At the time the police said the rebels had been planning to seize hostages and demand the release of imprisoned leaders. Lori Helene Berenson, a New Yorker, was among those arrested and is currently serving a life sentence without parole in Puno, Peru, on the Bolivian border.

Political violence in Peru has dropped sharply since Abimael Guzman, the leader of the Shining Path, was captured in 1992. He is serving a life sentence in solitary confinement.

Rebel attacks continue in parts of the countryside. Last month, Shining Path guerrillas hacked to death two former rebels who gave up fighting during a Government amnesty program.

The Shining Path terrorized Peru during its height in the 1980's with attacks in both the capital and countryside.

More than 30,000 people have died in 16 years of guerrilla violence in Peru.