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RESCUE IN PERU: THE OVERVIEW

PERU TROOPS RESCUE HOSTAGES; REBELS SLAIN AS STANDOFF ENDS

By CLIFFORD KRAUSS

Peruvian Army soldiers stormed the occupied residence of the Japanese Ambassador in Lima, Peru, yesterday, ending a four-month hostage stalemate in an eruption of smoke and gunfire. All but one of the 72 hostages were rescued, and 14 Marxist guerrillas who had held them died in the assault, as did one hostage and two military officers, according to Peru's President.

No rebels got out of the residence alive, according to Peruvian television reports.

The raid appeared to be a complete surprise to the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement after months of inconclusive international globe-trotting by Japanese and Peruvian leaders seeking a peaceful settlement. In the end, the rebels reportedly refused offers of safe passage to Cuba or the Dominican Republic unless they achieved their principal goal: the release of hundreds of their comrades held in Peruvian prisons.

The violent end of a crisis that had threatened Peru's economic and political stability initially appeared to shore up President Alberto K. Fujimori at home and abroad, although the Japanese Prime Minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto, pointedly said his country had not been informed in advance of the attack. Mr. Fujimori had signed an agreement with the Japanese to consult them before taking any military action.

In an improvised press conference atop a tank tonight, the President acknowledged that he had not warned the Japanese and apologized.

"There was no other way out," Mr. Fujimori said. He confirmed that the captive who died was Supreme Court Justice Carlos Giusti Acuna, and that the rebel leader, Nestor Cerpa Cartolini, was killed. He broke into tears when he described the death of a general who had been the bodyguard of his youngest son.

Eight rebels, including Mr. Cerpa, were killed or wounded in an explosion set by soldiers in a tunnel under a hallway during the rebels' daily game of indoor soccer, according to Jorge Gumucio, the Bolivian Ambassador, who was freed in the raid. He said that the hostages got a 10-minute warning of the attack, but did not elaborate.

The 150-member assault force split up into three parts. One group blasted open the mansion's front door with explosives, another attacked from the rear, and a third group operated on the roof, with some soldiers shepherding hostages to waiting ambulances.

M. The explosion at about 3:30 P.M. rocked the graceful residence and surrounding San Isidro, a fashionable neighborhood that had become an armed camp of soldiers and the police in recent months. National television broke into regular programming almost immediately, broadcasting scenes of smoke billowing from the building and jubilant soldiers ripping the rebel flag from the compound. Although details emerged only slowly about how the assault unfolded, it obviously reflected extensive knowledge of the situation inside the compound, presumably gained from interviews with released hostages, and probably from electronic surveillance. Early reports suggested that explosions went off from tunnels dug beneath the compound.

Foreign Minister Francisco Tudela suffered a gunshot wound to the ankle during a gunbattle between guerrillas and troops, and about 20 others were injured in the crossfire and scuffle. The Japanese Ambassador, Morihisa Aoki, was slightly wounded. The condition of the President's brother, Pedro Fujimori, was not immediately known.

President Fujimori, wearing a flak jacket over his customary white dress-shirt, arrived shortly after the gunfire stopped and strode victoriously in front of the newly liberated hostages and his troops for a victory ceremony, which included the playing of the Peruvian anthem.

The Japanese Government, which is a major source of foreign aid to Peru, had long urged Mr. Fujimori to seek a peaceful resolution. Prime Minister Hashimoto was supportive of the raid and told reporters in Tokyo, "There should be no one who can criticize President Fujimori for this decision."

In Washington, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen said, "They acted responsibly."

The Clinton Administration had supported Mr. Fujimori throughout the crisis, but its offer of technical assistance in any storming of the compound was turned down, at least publicly. The Peruvian Army has received American military support over the years, but it also received military materiel and advice from the Soviet Union and more recently from Russia and Belarus.

Mr. Cerpa's death leaves the guerrilla group, most of whose members are in jail, virtually leaderless. The competing and far more radical Shining Path rebels are still at war with the Government but have not made any recent serious attacks.

The Government was badly shaken by an obvious intelligence breakdown when the rebels almost effortlessly seized the Ambassador's residence on Dec. 17, taking hostage more than 700 diplomats, Cabinet members and army officers who had gathered for a birthday party honoring the Japanese Emperor.

Before the raid, Mr. Fujimori had all but declared victory in a ferocious 15-year war between the Government and the guerrilla groups and had promised an era of prosperity.

The rebels, once ensconced in the compound and outfitted with booby traps and bombs, went on an international propaganda offensive. They released all but 72 hostages in the early weeks. They transmitted bitter criticisms of Peruvian prison conditions in interviews over short-wave radio and on the Internet. Their presence in the compound deeply embarrassed Mr. Fujimori, who disappeared from public view for more than a week at the beginning of the crisis.

The storming of the Japanese residence recalled other recent hostage-takings in Latin America that marked important moments in their countries' histories. In Nicaragua in 1978, the taking of the National Palace by the Sandinista guerrillas sparked a broad-based popular revolt that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship a year later. In Colombia, guerrillas took hostages several times in the 1980's, and in one episode the Government destroyed the entire Supreme Court building and left 100 dead, including a dozen justices, rather than show weakness. That Government survived.

Mr. Fujimori, it now appears, took the lesson from the Nicaraguan and Colombian cases that a tough approach to hostage-takers would be the better course. But shortly after the raid, the Peruvian guerrilla movement announced that it would fight on.

Isaac Velazco, international spokesman for the Tupac Amaru, told the Reuters news agency that the rebels would retaliate. "There are economic and military targets that will be attacked," he said, adding that they had been chosen before the hostage-taking.

The Tupac Amaru rebels are a breakaway group from the leftist political party known as APRA, which took power in the 1980's under President Alan Garcia. Inspired by Cuba, the guerrilla movement was long overshadowed by the Shining Path guerrillas and never attracted significant political support.

Also known by its initials M.R.T.A., the movement made its biggest impact with a bombing campaign in Lima and other cities in the 1980's and 1990's. The rebels repeatedly bombed American targets, including a number of McDonald's restaurants, and financed their operations with kidnappings in Peru and neighboring Bolivia.

At its peak, the movement may have had as many as 3,000 members in the late 1980's. Its principal leader, Victor Polay, is in jail and is believed to be deteriorating psychologically under solitary confinement.

When many other guerrilla movements around Latin America gave up their fight with the end of the cold war, both the Tupac Amaru and Shining Path rebels pledged to continue their insurrections. But as Mr. Fujimori dissolved Congress and the Supreme Court and suspended civil liberties, he succeeded in capturing most of the prominent rebel leaders in the early 1990's.

Mr. Fujimori had consistently said he was committed to a peaceful resolution to the crisis, but he kept his options open. While army troops staged maneuvers in front of the compound complete with noisy helicopter flyovers, workmen built tunnels under the residence during much of February. The guerrillas complained about the tunnels, and broke off negotiations for a time in March.

Mr. Fujimori shared his plans with only a handful of advisers during the crisis. But a break in Government planning that led to a violent resolution appeared to occur last weekend, when the President shuffled the leadership of his security forces. The Interior Minister and police commander were forced to resign, and after they took responsibility for the hostage-taking five months before, they were replaced by two hard-line generals.

Those generals, Cesar Saucedo and Fernando Dianderas, were believed to have pushed for the raid to demonstrate the Government's resolve against terrorism.

Concerned that an attack was imminent, the Peruvian Roman Catholic Archbishop, Juan Luis Cipriani, a mediator in the negotiations, sent a letter to Prime Minister Hashimoto urging him to press for a peaceful end to the crisis.

It appears that the United States knew the Peruvian forces were preparing for a raid, although Mr. Cohen said it "was entirely a Peruvian Government operation."

Later, in an interview on CNN, he said: "The U.S. played virtually no role. We have offered services to the Peruvian Government, the exact nature of which I really can't say. But this was principally and solely an operation by the Peruvian Government."

In a statement, the State Department spokesman, Nicholas Burns, said, "One thing is clear: the M.R.T.A. bears the full and complete responsibility for this outcome." He added, "We are not going to second-guess the Peruvian Government."

Among the original hostages were the leading members of Peru's Supreme Court and security forces, as well as the ambassadors and senior diplomats from Germany, Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Egypt, Spain, France, Britain, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Poland, South Korea and Venezuela. Five mid-level United States officials were released in the first week.

In the early days of the crisis, the hostages and their captors discussed politics and sometimes ate together, from box lunches delivered by the Red Cross. During the early releases, some hostages had complimentary things to say about their captors.

But over time, mediators and relief workers reported that the hostages were suffering from depression and anxiety as their hopes rose and sank repeatedly.