

Jail and trial are next for wounded Peru Indians

By ANDREW WHALEN, Associated Press Writer – Tue Aug 4, 2:00 am ET

CHICLAYO, Peru – Santiago Manuin is lucky to be alive. On June 5, the Awajun Indian leader was hit by at least four bullets when police broke up a protest by Indians over government plans for large-scale economic development of their ancestral lands in the Amazon.

Inside his hospital room, Manuin lies in a bed while a plastic pouch drains his intestines. Outside the door, five police officers lounge on wooden benches, AK-47 assault rifles resting across their knees.

Manuin is the most prominent of 48 protesters wounded in the June melee who face jail the moment hospital doctors sign discharge papers, according to Peru's main Amazon Indian federation.

Critics of the government say it is no way to treat people who engaged in peaceful civil disobedience — blocking roads and rivers — to protect their traditional lands from the oil drilling, mining, farming and logging projects envisioned by President Alan Garcia.

Negotiations to resolve the dispute, involving 350,000 Amazon Indians, will be difficult if the government treats the protest leaders as criminals, the U.N. special envoy on indigenous rights, James Anaya, said last week.

The dark, wiry Manuin is more blunt.

"Justice doesn't exist for the indigenous. The government values the police more than us and doesn't want to acknowledge its mistake," the 53-year-old apu, or tribal leader, said from his hospital bed.

The government's mistake, Indian leaders and sympathizers say, has been to vilify protest leaders while failing to consider that police might have used excessive force. At least 10 civilians and 23 police officers were killed in the violence, while 200 civilians were wounded, 82 by gunshot, according to Peru's ombudsman's office.

"It's very surprising that while there are criminal investigations against people accused of killing police, no one has been arrested or implicated for the abuses that led to the death of the indigenous protesters," said Susan Lee, director of Amnesty International's Americas program. Amnesty says it has gathered testimony telling of police abuses.

Peru's justice minister, Auerelio Pastor, defended the police action before a U.N. Human Rights Committee in Geneva on Monday and said the government has no plans to drop any charges.

The government's request that protesters clear the road "by no means justifies acts of violence, and the seizure of highways and interruption of public services is illegal," he said.

Pastor also echoed a claim repeatedly voiced by Garcia: that unidentified foreign elements have incited the Indians to instigate the violence.

The president of AIDSESEP, the Indian federation that organized the protests, says 120 Indians have been charged with crimes including murder and sedition. Many wounded Indians have not sought medical attention for fear of arrest, the federation's president, Daysi Zapata, told The Associated Press.

AIDSESEP's top leader, Alberto Pizango, and two other officials of the organization have taken asylum in Nicaragua from sedition and rebellion charges.

In a July report following a visit to Peru, Anaya, the U.N. envoy, called for an independent, internationally backed investigation into the violence.

The government has yet to publicly respond.

Manuin is expected to be released from the main hospital in Chiclayo shortly after an operation this week to close the hole in his stomach and reconnect his intestines. He will then be jailed and tried on charges of inciting murder and unrest, which carry a maximum penalty of 35 years in prison. His lawyer has appealed to reduce his arrest warrant to an order to appear in court.

The Jesuit-schooled Manuin is an internationally recognized activist who met with Spain's Queen Sofia in 1994 after leading Awajun resistance to leftist rebels who tried to get his people to grow coca, the basis of cocaine.

On June 5, when heavily armed police advanced toward nearly 5,000 protesters at a highway blockade, he says he approached the officers seeking to talk.

"I never made it because they opened fire when I was about 50 meters (yards) away," Manuin said. Bullets tore open his left side.

Other protesters saw he was hurt, and "hand-to-hand combat broke out to remove the guns from police," he added.

Erroneous reports of Manuin's death spurred a bloody reaction hours later when Awajun protesters killed 12 police officers they had taken captive at an oil pipeline station.

Manuin faults the government, not the police officers, who he says told Indian leaders on June 4 that their superiors in Lima had ordered them to clear the highway.

The Cabinet chief at the time, Yehude Simon, said the entire Cabinet voted to issue the order. He and the then-interior minister were replaced last month as Garcia sought to allay public criticism of his handling of the protests.

The Indians had been blockading jungle highways and rivers on and off since last August, demanding the revocation of 11 decrees issued by Peru's president last year under the rubric of a free trade pact with the United States.

Peru's Congress repealed two of the decrees after protests last year and two more after June's bloodshed. Indians feared the decrees would lead to a widespread land and resource grab by private companies.

Despite the revocations of some of the decrees, 75 percent of Peru's Amazon remains carved up into oil concessions, with the government owning all subsoil rights.

"If they want to put the Amazon up for sale, they'll do it by spilling blood. Period," Manuin said.