

PERU - Dirty War Allegations Cast Shadow on Nationalist Candidate (Ángel Páez, IPS)

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IPS - After unexpectedly shooting to the top of the polls in Peru, anti-establishment presidential candidate Ollanta Humala has seen his popularity drop due to questions about his possible involvement in the "dirty war" against dissidents.

The families of victims of military abuses committed in the 1980s and early 1990s have accused Humala of human rights violations that took place when he was commander of the counterinsurgency base in Madre Mía, a town in the Alto Huallaga valley in Peru's Amazon jungle region, in 1992.

At that time, the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) Maoist guerrillas were gaining strength after forging alliances with drug traffickers.

"I have not murdered or tortured anyone," the 43-year-old retired army colonel, who is running in the Apr. 9 elections, has repeated to the press and to his followers in campaign rallies.

The relatives of people who were tortured, forcibly disappeared or killed told the media that the candidate was known in Madre Mía as "Captain Carlos", and that they recognised him from photos.

Humala initially denied that he was Captain Carlos. And although he later admitted that he had gone by that name, he said he was only one of four officers who used that "nom de guerre," and that he knew of a Captain Carlos who violated human rights, but would not reveal his true identity.

A source in the office of prosecutor Luz Ibáñez, who is coordinating the investigation by the public prosecutor's office of human rights violations allegedly committed or supervised by Humala, told IPS that they had begun to gather testimony and would soon visit Madre Mía.

"This is not only a case involving Ollanta Humala, because during the period that he was posted to that area, there were three other 'Captain Carlos's' as well," said the source.

Humala has stated in public: "Let them file charges, I will respond to each one. They can put me in prison if they want, but nationalism will continue to gain ground."

"If I am summoned by the judge, I will appear in court," he added.

Meanwhile, the number of witnesses who say they recognise him from that period has continued to grow, to at least five.

According to Humala, he used an alias to avoid reprisals by the insurgents.

Humala, who graduated in 1984 from the military academy in Chorrillos, has not referred to the fact that in 1983, he took a course at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA), which was then based in Panama (before moving to Fort Benning, Georgia in 1984).

Tens of thousands of Latin American officers and soldiers have taken courses at the notorious U.S. army institution, where they are trained in combat, counter-insurgency, and counter-narcotics techniques.

In 1996, the U.S. Department of Defence was forced to release training manuals that had been used to instruct Latin American military personnel at the SOA that advocated torture, extortion and execution as

counterinsurgency tactics.

The SOA's graduates include Vladimiro Montesinos, who served as security adviser to former Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). Montesinos is accused of orchestrating a vast network of corruption during the Fujimori regime, and is now in prison facing a long list of charges, including extrajudicial executions.

Another Peruvian SOA graduate was Telmo Hurtado, wanted by the courts for a 1985 massacre in the Andean highlands town of Accomarca, where 69 peasants, many of them women and children, were shot to death and their bodies incinerated.

Yet another who trained at the SOA was Santiago Martín Rivas, the head of the Colima Group paramilitary death squad, who under the orders of Montesinos - and with Fujimori's approval - kidnapped, tortured and killed at least 35 people.

School of Americas Watch, a human rights group lobbying to shut down the SOA, has included Humala on a list of the institution's graduates.

Humala, who puts a strong emphasis on his Andean indigenous roots, defends indigenous rights and is especially popular among the rural poor, has told huge rallies of his supporters around the country that the allegations that he was involved in human rights abuses during Peru's civil war amount to nothing but a smear campaign aimed at derailing his candidacy.

He also accuses the media of taking part in the campaign against him.

It is true that no television or radio station backs or sympathises with Humala, and that most of the press has lined up behind conservative candidate Lourdes Flores.

Flores, who was outstripped by Humala in the polls, has regained the lead she enjoyed last year. Former president Alan García (1985-1990) is in third place, behind Humala.

Instead of responding directly to the allegations, Humala has called on Defence Minister Marciano Rengifo, a retired general, to "respond to the claims of human rights organisations, and to the authorities" asking for information on his command in Madre Mía.

"There are things that the army should say about my functions in that town," he stated.

On earlier occasions, the Defence Ministry has declared that its files on the counterinsurgency war had been incinerated "for security reasons."

Another of the arguments wielded by Humala is that his name does not figure anywhere in the final report put out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which investigated the political violence of the 1980s and early 1990s.

While it is true that the report does not list Humala as responsible for the torture or killings of civilians during the "dirty war", the Commission's former chairman, Salomón Lerner, and two other former commissioners, Sofía Macher and Carlos Tapia, have clarified that due to the limited time they spent conducting the probe, the testimony of a number of people, involving many cases, went undocumented.

That was especially true, they said, of the testimony collected in the Amazon jungle region where Captain Carlos operated.

Furthermore, the file containing the cases that the Commission did not finish compiling includes the testimony from relatives of a couple, Natividad Ávila and Benigno Sullca, who were "disappeared" on Jun. 17, 1992 in Madre Mía at the hands of a Captain Carlos. At that time, the military base was under Humala's command.

According to the testimony collected by the Commission, to which IPS had access, Benigno's brother Jorge was also detained, and survived.

Jorge Sullca stated on a TV programme that Captain Carlos killed his brother and sister-in-law.

Later, Natividad's sister, Teresa Ávila, directly challenged Humala, declaring: "You are Captain Carlos, I know you."

Ávila said that in June 1992, when she found out that her sister and brother-in-law had been hauled in by the soldiers, she went to the Madre Mía military base and asked Captain Carlos - who she later identified as Humala - to release them.

But, she said, the officer refused. "I went to beg him to set them free. I know him, I'm saying it to his face," said Ávila, who in February 2002 testified before the Commission.

Back then, Humala did not even imagine that one day he would be a leading presidential candidate.

"I have already stated that I put myself at the disposal of the justice system, and that I will respond to all of the charges. I have a clear conscience. I haven't murdered anyone," said Humala.

However, it has been clearly documented that the only Captain Carlos to command the Madre Mía military base in 1992 was Humala, who has a few problems from the past to set straight before his dream of becoming president of Peru can come true.

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