

# LAST BEST HOPE FOR PERU?

*Peru's new president takes on the country's three-headed scourge of cocaine, corruption and a decade of vicious insurrection.*

BY SHARON STEVENSON

**F**OR A MULTITUDE OF HISTORICAL REASONS PERU IS AN ECONOMICALLY, morally, and socially sick nation – and the new President, Alberto Fujimori, knows it. Corruption has been bred within incoherent, debilitated national institutions and fattened on dollars generated by the illegal drug trade. The greatest challenge to Fujimori is the reform of government: making it a constructive and just force in people's lives. He must convince Peruvians to help their government go after narcotrafficking, insurgents and the corruption which permeates all.

The hidden weapon in Peru's drug war is political will or rather, lack of it. The major foreign player, the United States, accuses Peru of not demonstrating the political will to fight America's number one problem, drugs. The US, still under the shadow of Vietnam, shows no political will to get involved with what Peruvians see as their number one problem: a two-headed insurgency, fought by the Khmer Rouge-like *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) and the Castroist Revolutionary Movement Tupac Amaru (MRTA), both of which flourish in the coca growing areas.

After his inauguration in July 1990, Fujimori, born in Peru of Japanese parents and nicknamed the "Karate Kid," came out swinging. He lambasted the Catholic church for its resistance to birth control, and lashed out at the justice system, calling its seat the "Palace of Injustice," and its judges "jackals." After four years of self-imposed isolation and disastrous economic policies directed by the outgoing President, Alan Garcia, Fujimori initiated a gruelling austerity programme to stabilize the economy and reinsert Peru into the international financial community.

Garcia had left behind a bankrupt treasury and a "narcoeconomy," where coca exports bring in an estimated US \$1 to 2 billion in uncontrolled and untaxed revenues (legitimate exports from Peru in 1989 were \$3.5 billion), resulting in a distorted economy and wreaking havoc with the dollar exchange rate. The fight against drugs and subversion had taken a back seat.

PERU IS THE SUPPLIER FOR SOME SIXTY PERCENT OF THE COCA PLANT leaves<sup>1</sup> which feed the US cocaine habit and increasingly that of Europe. The Upper Huallaga valley in northeastern Peru became notorious in the early 1980s. It produces the finest quality coca plants and became the distribution and business centre for flying out cocaine to Colombia. It also became the anti-drug operations headquarters financed by the US which had funded several years of low-level interdiction and the physical eradication of coca plants in the Upper Huallaga. In 1989, agents of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the anti-drug police they advise set up a new base there and expanded their operations.

The US drug policy in Peru, which even knowledgeable sources admit is in "tatters," has been based in self-delusion and fear: self-delusion that they can cut off the drug supply without getting involved in Peru's main problem, a gruesome subversion, and fear that doing so would in-

volve the US in "another Vietnam" or even El Salvador. However, in refusing to meet the wrenching complexity of Peru's coca growing regions head on, the current US see-no-hear-no-speak-no-counterinsurgency attitude runs against both Peruvian and American interests.

In September 1989, President Bush and the US Congress unilaterally decided that Andean countries should receive military aid for the drug fight – \$35.9 million was set aside for Peru. The programme was designed to entice its armed forces into doing "something" in the drug fight – "isolating" the Huallaga by cutting the flow of coca products, and the chemicals necessary for processing them, by land, river and air.

Although the Peruvian constitution forbids the armed forces to fight drugs – nominally a police matter – naval and air forces can justify anti-drug operations to reestablish Peruvian control over its own riverways and airspace. The US Congress and administration wedded themselves to the politically safe, if twisted, logic that the army could, in the words of US spokespersons in Lima "provide security for anti-drug operations" in the valley, but would only "control" and keep the two armed guerrilla movements there off balance. In fact, by law, the funds allocated could only be used for counternarcotics purposes, and against subversion only where allied with narcotrafficking.

*SENDERISTAS*, HOWEVER, ARE NOT JUST "NARCO-TERRORISTS." THEY ARE dedicated revolutionaries whose primary objective is the political takeover of Peru. The organization has, indeed, received a great funding boost in the last two years through its protection racket with narcos and the "war taxes" they impose on coca growers and anyone else they can intimidate. And increasingly, there are indications *Sendero* would like to take over the distribution system itself.

Typically, they establish their political dominance in "liberated" areas with a "bad-guy, good-guy" approach in which they brutally torture and slaughter anyone who resists them or represents the capitalist system. They often force villagers to turn their children over to the guerrilla army, then offer a "justice" system, to control stealing and adultery. They also appoint ruling "delegates" and "committees" at gunpoint.

Alberto Fujimori, an agronomist and university professor who came from nowhere to win the presidency last year, is no political fool. Like his predecessor, he refused to sign the military aid agreement with the US before the deadline, and so forfeited the \$35.9 million. He was being pushed into accepting American aid which would exacerbate an already militarized counterinsurgency strategy, without providing the carrot for what counterinsurgency experts call "the other war" – the war for hearts and minds. American aid with no coordinated, political, economic, social and psychological effort, would only inflame nationalist anti-American sentiment exploitable by the insurgency, leading Peru into its own disastrous Vietnam or El Salvador.

Fujimori's greatest battle will be to reconstitute his government's moral legitimacy in the eyes of Peru's rural, peasant population – largely Andean and Amazonian peoples who have historically been abandoned

1. For millenia, *Erythoxylum coca* has been an integral part of the lives of Quechua and Aymara speaking communities in Peru and Bolivia. The coca leaf is chewed routinely by millions of people in the Andes and Amazonia to suppress the sensations of hunger, thirst and fatigue. The leaf also fulfils medicinal and religious purposes.