

3. PERU: PRESIDENT'S PRIVATE COUNTERTERRORISM FORCE

Frustrated by continued terrorism and what it sees as a lack of legal alternatives to combat it, Peru's ruling APRA party is sponsoring secret paramilitary groups. These have bloodied Sendero Luminoso (SL) terrorists but created other vulnerabilities for President Garcia: the vigilantism will further weaken his standing with the military and political opposition.

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Secret organizations. The Garcia administration operates a secret paramilitary organization, perhaps several. One, a branch of APRA codenamed COSEPAP (security and intelligence command), is so compartmentalized that many APRA officials are unaware of its existence. It reportedly has agreed to send 1,000 of its members to North Korea for training by 1989; about 300 have been there already.

High-level government involvement. Close associates of President Garcia--APRA Senator Armando Villanueva and Alberto Kitasono, APRA organizational secretary--apparently direct COSEPAP. Acting on Garcia's instructions to retaliate for the October 2 assassination of an APRA leader, COSEPAP recently botched an attempted bombing of a pro-SL newspaper. In addition, Garcia's vice interior minister, Agustin Mantilla, supervises a secret police force that is armed with interior ministry weapons.

Reports of executions. Mantilla reportedly believes that APRA needs the capability to eliminate terrorists because of the judicial system's tendency to release them and police reluctance to kill captured SL militants.

Embarrassed APRA, edgy opposition. Although the paramilitary units appear now to act only against terrorists, the specter of APRA violence is unnerving Garcia's political rivals. Opposition congressmen tried to censure the interior minister for his suspected role in the attempted kidnapping of a leftist congressman with alleged SL ties. After Garcia ordered that APRA congressmen be briefed about their party's "self-defense" units, they used APRA's legislative majority to support the minister. But Garcia's reputation as a human rights crusader was tarnished.

Military concerns. Exactly who in the armed forces knows what about the paramilitary squads is unclear. The vice interior minister claims that army intelligence assisted his anti-terrorist squad even as the navy was investigating it. Given the propensity of Garcia's private army to make embarrassing public mistakes, military awareness will in any case grow.

Military leaders probably are delighted by Garcia's loss of the moral high ground, which lessens pressure on them to be concerned about human rights abuses. But those perpetual coup plotters in the military who are aware of APRA's sponsorship of paramilitary groups must also be aware these could be used to raise the costs of any attempted move against the regime.