

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WHM - 33  
Revolt in Iquitos

American Embassy  
Lima, Perú  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
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522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

For the last month Peruvian politics had been following a predictable pattern of violent verbal attacks delivered by government and opposition speakers against their enemies. Pedro Rosselló and his cohorts took a swing through the politically powerful northern coastal region. The pro-government Partido Restaurador held big rallies in the southern provinces. The government appeared to be paying heed to the demands of the opposition by relaxing the Law of Internal Security of the Republic and declaring a partial political amnesty; anti-government attacks were overlooked, and opposition parties and papers were allowed to operate in relatively complete freedom. To many people it looked as though Perú was going through a violent political campaign which would ultimately end in democratic presidential elections this June third.

Then, on the afternoon of Friday, February the sixteenth, the government suddenly reversed its lenient attitude. In a series of well-planned moves, the Odría police arrested Pedro Beltrán, director of LA PRENSA, Pedro Rosselló, leader of the Coalición Nacional, and other opposition figures. Those who wished to save their skins fled to the protection of foreign embassies in the city or to the provinces. A moderate form of martial law was declared.

Reason for the abrupt about face, said the government, was the revolt on February sixteenth of certain elements of the División de la Selva (Forest Division) stationed in the jungle city of Iquitos. According to a United Press release from Iquitos, the revolt was being led by its commander, General Marcial Merino Pereyra, who seized government buildings and authorities in the city and declared in a "Manifesto to the Nation" that the purpose of the revolt was to insure complete freedom for the elections of June third. Government announcements published in the official newspaper LA NACION and broadcast over the State radio station accused Beltrán and the Coalición Nacional leaders of being the originators of the plot. A communiqué issued by the Ministry of Government and Police on the seventeenth of February stated:

In execution of the measures adopted to safeguard public order, don Pedro Beltrán has been arrested. (Mr. Beltrán) was the principal instigator of the subversive campaign in which "La Prensa", organ of the Mutiny of Iquitos, has been engaging, witness the edition which was ready to be distributed today.

In making this arrest the authorities

have not closed "La Prensa" nor have they hindered the normal work of its (presses). No order has been given prohibiting the free circulation of said newspaper or its evening (counterpart) "Ultima Hora".

Lima, February 17, 1956

According to EL COMERCIO, often LA PRENSA's bitter foe in matters of national policies but one of the first voices to be raised against what it termed "a censurable offense against the freedom of the press", police and government investigators broke through the locked main gate of the LA PRENSA building and tossed tear gas bombs into the patio. The authorities mounted to the second floor of the building where they found Beltrán surrounded by a group of his newspapermen. The group accompanied Beltrán to the street - evidently demanding to be taken into custody with him - and refused to be transported to the penitentiary in the police trucks which had been provided. Instead, they marched to the prison, by way of an indirect route, followed by bands of police and plainclothesmen. A rumor now current in the city adds that the newspapermen sang the national anthem as they marched to further embarrass the government men. The arrest took place during the early morning hours of February seventeenth.

Pedro Rosselló was taken in an equally dramatic manner. The Coalición Nacional leader was arrested in the Club Nacional at approximately the same time that police were entering the LA PRENSA building. The Club Nacional is an elite organization composed of some of the country's richest and most powerful families. There was a great deal of resentment, therefore, when the staid and conservative atmosphere of the old building in Plaza San Martín was shattered by the entrance of a large force of policemen. Rosselló was arrested along with a club member who apparently spoke out too strongly against the invasion of the organization's privacy. The club member was released almost immediately, but Rosselló was conducted to the penitentiary. The president of the Club Nacional sent a letter of protest to EL COMERCIO stating among other things that the building's main doors would be closed for forty-eight hours in symbolic protest against the early morning events of February seventeenth.

Political arrests did not stop with the detention of Beltrán and Rosselló. Three Senators, among them the head of the Peruvian Socialist party, were also taken. Luis Flores, head of the sometime fascist Revolutionary Union party, evaded capture and went into hiding. In the six days since the outbreak of the Iquitos insurrection, there has been a steady flow of arrested and released persons travelling in and out of prisons and offices of the police. One of the latest arrests to be published in the papers: Doris Gibson, directress of a Lima picture magazine. Beltrán and Rosselló are apparently still in custody.

As is usual in Perú in a case of national emergency, the government issued a decree suspending some important constitutional guarantees in order to facilitate the work of its police and intelligence forces. On Friday morning EL COMERCIO printed the following official communiqué:

Supreme Decree No. 3441  
The President of the Republic

By the power conferred upon him by the second clause of Article 154 of the Constitution of the State;

CONSIDERING:

That a subversive movement has broken out in the city of Iquitos as a result of a (plot) which has been developed since last December by (certain) known political groups;

That it is the duty of the Government to adopt the measures necessary to maintain the security of the State and conserve the public order;

In compliance with (the contents of) Article 70 of the Constitution; and

With the approval of the Council of Ministers;

DECREES:

That from this date and for a period of thirty days, the guarantees set forth in Articles 56, 61, 62, 67 and 68 of the Constitution are suspended throughout all national territory.

The Ministries of Government and Police, War, Navy and Aviation are charged with insuring the execution of this decree.

Given in the House of Government in Lima, the sixteenth day of February, 1956.

MANUEL A. ODRÍA

The constitutional guarantees suspended by Decree No. 3441 are: the right of habeas corpus; the inviolability of the home; the right of public assembly; the right to travel freely within the country and across its borders; and the safeguard against being deported or taken forcibly from one's residence without due process of law. Under this modified form of martial law, the police forces are entitled to enter any building in the country to arrest the enemies of the government without a search warrant. As a further precaution against a possible spread of the rebellion, the Odría regime has declared that safe-conduct passes issued by the offices of the prefects and sub-prefects must be secured by those individuals who wish to travel from one town or city to another. Friends of mine driving along Lima streets after midnight have been stopped by police and warned not to travel in the city late at night without a pass. In addition, certain bars and restaurants have stopped selling alcoholic beverages in the evening.

The government has definitely not shut down the LA PRENSA presses,

witness the fact that the NEW YORK TIMES Peruvian edition, which is printed here by LA PRENSA machines using mats sent down from New York, is still appearing on the newsstands. However, both LA PRENSA and its affiliated evening paper ULTIMA HORA refuse to operate until the government censors who have been installed in their offices have been removed. With two of the largest papers in the country out of commission (ULTIMA HORA boasts the largest circulation figures in Perú) the news blackout is almost complete. EL COMERCIO and other papers print a few short UP releases and government communiqués which are usually a day old. Official radio announcements are apt to be terse comments about the progress of the campaign to put down the rebellion. No mention is made of political arrests and events in the capital, and emphasis is placed on the loyalty of the armed forces, save the rebel elements of the Forest Division, and the complete tranquility which prevails in the country with the exception of Iquitos. The NEW YORK TIMES appears to be more lucid with respect to the nature of the revolt than all the papers in Lima combined.

Starved for news and uneasy in the face of the restrictive measures taken by the government, the civilian population of Lima can only sit and wait, listen to the latest rumors and try to decipher the vague official announcements. All telephone and airline services between Iquitos and the coast have been interrupted with the result that General Merino's uprising seems to be taking place in a news vacuum. It is known that Iquitos is being blockaded by loyal naval units on the Amazon and that Brazil has sent troops to the border to prevent the insurgents from crossing over into her territory. Beyond that, nothing seems to be definite.

Immediately after the arrest of its leaders and the confiscation of its headquarters, the Coalición Nacional sent a note of protest to EL COMERCIO. The CN said that it had nothing to do with the revolt, that it had always advocated a peaceful form of opposition to the government. In the light of its short campaign, that statement would seem to be true. In Arequipa and elsewhere, Rosselló and his lieutenants were careful to point out that they wanted to create an atmosphere of political freedom in which the presidential elections could take place and they wanted to create it without recourse to violence. The mere fact that General Merino dedicated his uprising to the purpose of obtaining similar freedom does not necessarily associate him with the Coalición Nacional. On the other hand, there is nothing to disprove the government contention that the CN and other groups were actually planning to overthrow the present regime by revolutionary means. There are rumors aplenty on both sides of the question, and with no facts to guide him the average limeño simply believes what he wants to believe.

The latest edition of the pro-government PULSO accuses General Merino of having been a leading light among the pro-fascist members of the Revolutionary Union many years ago. According to PULSO, one of Merino's political associates during the days when the UR members wore black shirts in imitation of the European dictators was Manuel Mujica Gallo, until recently the assistant of Pedro Rosselló in the CN. Merino is also accused by PULSO of deserting his post at a time when "Ecuador is actively preparing for an armed invasion of our territory." This is a new slant on the old rumors having to do with military trouble on both sides of the Perú-Ecuador jungle border.

Amidst the babble of rumors and groundless stories, one question is asked again and again. Why did the rebels pick Iquitos? As I have mentioned in previous reports, the majority of successful revolutions have started in Arequipa. Iquitos lies hundreds of miles from the politically powerful coastal areas. The city of 45,000 inhabitants can be reached from Lima by air (three hours, direct flight) or by travelling 525 overland miles to Pucallpa and floating down the Pachitea and Ucayali rivers for about four hundred and sixty miles. What possible impact could a revolt in such a remote area achieve in Arequipa, Lima or Trujillo? If the rebels were counting on simultaneous revolutionary activities in the coastal cities ( a recent rumor asserts that the original plan of revolt called for coordinated uprisings in Arequipa, Iquitos and the northern town of Tumbes) they were sadly let down. Government announcements have made a point of stressing the complete lack of rebellious activity in the rest of the country. Beltrán, Roselló and the rest of the opposition leaders who have been denounced by the Ministry of Government and Police are known to be intelligent men. Many people think it odd, therefore, that they would foment a revolt which was so obviously doomed to failure from the very beginning.

Aside from the arrests of opposition leaders and the suspension of the constitutional guarantees mentioned above, there is little noticeable tension in the streets of Lima. Except in the circles of society which have been or may be directly effected by government action, there is little cause for excitement. The people are conditioned to rapid and violent events in the field of politics and, although they may be anxious as to the outcome of the present situation, they know that any activity beyond listening to the rumors and talking quietly to their friends might very well get them into trouble with a police force charged with carrying out the measures of martial law.

Not all opposition parties have been subject to government intervention and arrest. I have seen no mention of the Christian Democrat party in the articles published by pro-government papers attacking the opposition. Last night the Pradista party held a convention (irregardless of the suspension of the right of public assembly) and listened to the taped voice of Manuel Prado himself. However, despite the fact that some opposition parties have been allowed to remain in operation, the fact remains that the country is now ruled by a form of siege law and that a group of rebels are trapped in a jungle town waiting for the end. Regardless of who started it and why, the bloodless "pocket revolt" has resulted in a complete reversal for those who believed that the country would go to the polls this June to vote for candidates put forth by government and opposition forces in the manner prescribed by democratic law.

Sincerely,

*William H. MacLeish*  
William H. MacLeish