Letter from Peru

A country torn apart by violence

Hans Veeken

"Could you possibly survive on this?" the old woman asks me while showing two coins in the palm of her hand. She stirs a huge pan of bean soup, simmering on an open fire. Rather perplexed I stare at the two coins, worth sixpence. Other women crowd around me, shaking their heads to assure me that this is indeed the amount of money on which they survive the day. Sixpence, how can you possibly survive on this in a town for which the United Nations calculated that the price of living is 20% higher than in New York?

Incredulously, I turn round to my guide Maria, an energetic woman from the Ministry of Health. "Yes, with this deposit the women prepare their meal. The joint effort is their only way to survive," she explains. "Could Médecins sans Frontières not provide them with an oven to enable them to bake their own bread and save money?" Maria asks me. "And water, doctor, water, I do not have to explain to you that good health starts with proper food and hygiene."

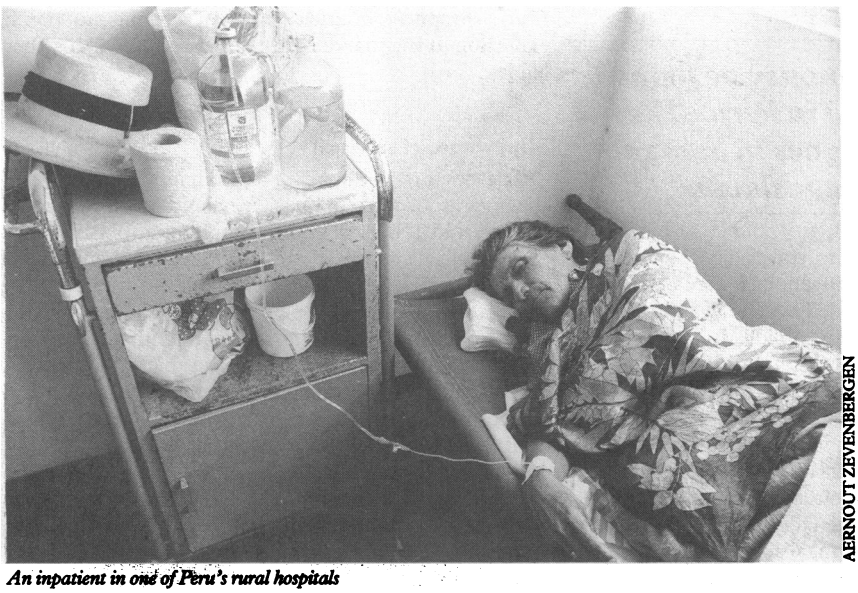
What else could I do but smile, as I stand in the dilapidated shed that serves as a soup kitchen in the middle of Canto Grande, one of the slums of Lima. Her enthusiasm is stimulating, all around me the women gaze as if asking me, "Do we really get the oven?" I inspect the two coins once more, they are worth sixpence and no more. I understand why the street vendor kept on running behind the car for two blocks, trying to sell his flowers—the sixpence profit could become his one and only meal of the day.

I realise I cannot promise her anything. Where could the money be found? Who is interested in Peru? The world's attention goes to Somalia and former Yugoslavia, there are wars there. But Peru is also in a war situation, although not so open. The country is torn apart by violence, which is initiated by terrorism and aggravated by army reprisals and the cocaine trade.

"How long have you lived in Canto Grande?" I ask one of the women, an old lady of 60. She stares at me incomprehensibly. Like most of the Indians in Peru she does not speak Spanish. A bystander translates the question into Quecha. "Last year, Senor, she fled because of the war. Her husband has been killed by the terrorists and she could not possibly stay longer in her village."

Médecins sans Frontières, PO Box 10014, 1001 EA, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Hans Veeken, *public health consultant*

BMJ 1993;306:1263-4



AERNOUT ZEVENBERGEN

An inpatient in one of Peru's rural hospitals

Over 25 000 civilians killed

Violence ranks number four in the top ten causes of mortality, the Minister of Health explained to me later that same day. The ruthless war that is practised by Sendero Luminoso in an attempt to overthrow the government has left over 25 000 civilians dead. Fear has led to over half a million Indians fleeing from the countryside to the cities. Thus farmers end up in Lima, a city with more than seven million inhabitants. They find a place in the slums and they try to survive. No water, no light, no sanitation, no job, and sixpence for food. That is the destiny of half of Peru's population, as poor as a churchmouse and scared of violence.

It is bad luck that during the past two years the violence has increased in Lima because of the infiltration of Sendero Luminoso in the city. It is true that bomb attacks are predominantly committed in the residential areas of Miraflores and san Isidro, but crude government actions to seek out the people who sympathise with Sendero in the slums makes life dangerous. Blackmail and sabotage are the order of the day. Some farmers decided to go back to their home villages in the mountains, where they stay on the run from violence.

We visit a health post in the slum, where I'm surprised to meet a doctor doing consultations. In the room next door a nurse explains the principles of family planning to some "promotores de salud," a kind of village health worker. The women of this quarter have been educated in the basics of hygiene and prevention. "Yes," Maria tells me, "the project has been initiated by the people themselves; the government helps through supplementing the salary of the doctor and the nurse for the afternoons only. Could Médecins sans Frontières not take over the project?" Maria asks hopefully.

The minister entertains us with a two hour lecture on the health problems of Peru. Figures rush by. What value can you put on them? Four thousand dispensaries seems a lot, but how many are still working? He quotes malaria, yellow fever, leishmaniasis, and the familiar pattern of diseases prevalent in developing countries, such as diarrhoea and respiratory infections. The minister keeps on lecturing and at 8 pm we leave the building exhausted. The ministry is still in full swing, an uncommon experience for a developing country. But Peru is full of hope, the population has faith in the government, and the capture of Guzman, the leader of Sendero Luminoso, has boosted their morale.

Unstaffed health posts

Nobody is able to tell us about the health situation in the red zones, where the government has imposed a state of emergency. "No," says Pepe, a Peruvian doctor, "the willingness to work in these zones is not great. Many health posts are not staffed. It is understandable if one of your predecessors has been shot, the next threatened, and recently one of your friends has 'disappeared.' Do go, and have a look yourself, but

AERNOUT ZEVENBERGEN

In the Peruvian highlands

take care." We decide to go to Huanta, the place of origin of the old ladies of the soup kitchen in Canto Grande. Half an hour flight and we are in Ayacucho, at 2600 m, the place where Guzman founded Sendero Luminoso 20 years ago. "Two weeks ago the radio station and a health post were attacked by Sendero," the hospital director tells us. He takes his time to explain the situation. There are also slums in Ayacucho with displaced people who fled from the violence in the mountain areas. "The migration towards the city started ten years ago, first farmers fled from the countryside because of the reprisals made by the government in an attempt to fight the terrorists. Later the increasing terror of Sendero forced the people to leave their villages and find refuge in the cities. The total number of inhabitants of Ayacucho increased from 30 000 to 200 000," the director explains.

The health facilities did not catch up with this increase. "Would you like to visit a health post?" he asks us. A moment later we find ourselves comfortably installed in the back of an old American taxi. The driver brings us through the narrow alleys to the health post that was attacked two weeks ago. The façade has been blown away, the equipment has been stolen. Only the fridge remains, locked away behind bars.

The next day we set off for Huanta, a small place 60 km away. The road is safe, controlled by the civil defence committees of the local farmers. Through a secret meeting with a professor in exile and an explanation at the army barracks—"Yes, the whole area is under control, you are free to travel where ever you want"—we get to the local convent of Huanta. A nurse runs a dispensary for the "needy." The waiting room is full of women with their children, waiting for vaccinations. From their colourful clothing, and their typical hats, and the way they carry their children on their backs it is obvious they come from the mountains. They have also fled from the violence. The nurse introduces us to Pablo, the mayor of a nearby village. He insists on showing us his village. "I already have an idea what it looks like," I mutter but the fact that the nurse does not hesitate to visit the place makes me give in, against all advice to travel further into the countryside.

"Where could the money be found? Who is interested in Peru? The world's attention goes to Somalia and former Yugoslavia."

Two latrines for 1000 people

On the way to Pablo's village we pass some women spinning beside the road. One of them waves and blows a whistle. A greeting? Pablo explains it is a signal to tell the other villagers about our arrival. Strategically located on top of a hill is an encampment, simple clay huts grouped together and surrounded by watchtowers. "During the night we assemble here in the encampment, we count everybody to see whether we are all in and we take turns to keep watch all night. This way we are safe from attacks by the terrorists," the mayor explains to me. "During the day everybody returns to their houses in the valley. We have lived like this for three years."

The village health worker shows us his post with enthusiasm. He has some oral rehydration salts, bandages, gentian violet, that is it. He could not quite remember the day a doctor visited the place. He asked if we could stay. There had been no attacks for more than two years. The encampment has no water and two latrines for 1000 people. The nursing post is four hours' walking distance away. Health care is grossly deficient.

"No water, no light, no sanitation, no job, and sixpence for food. That is the destiny of half of Peru's population, as poor as a churchmouse and scared of violence."

On the way back we assess the results. The area seems too dangerous. Sendero Luminoso consider medical aid as counter revolutionary, particularly if it is channelled through official government institutions. The government considers aid to areas where Sendero resides as subversive. Neutrality is not accepted by either side and this makes the work difficult.

The next day we return to the hospital to discuss the situation again. A small boy of 5 lies on a bed with a bullet wound through his leg. "How did this happen to someone so young?" I ask. With tears in her eyes the young boy's mother tells me that her village was attacked four weeks ago by the terrorists. Her husband and two children were killed along with 40 other villagers. She managed to escape with her son because they had been working in the field when the attack was made. The other patients on the ward are suffering from shrapnel wounds inflicted during a bomb explosion in the market. An old lady of 75 will lose her left leg.

Importance of solidarity

The doctors in the hospital are happy that we visit. But they, too, warn us that we should not work in the countryside. "If you could supply transport, drugs, and medical supplies we could take them there ourselves and give some supervision," says one of the doctors.

It seems a good option to start with support to national staff. Extending the project might be possible later. We discuss this plan with some priests who run a dispensary. Disappointed because we are not starting right away with one of our teams the father says: "I do understand your point of view, the fact that you have visited the place and showed interest and solidarity with the Indian population is sufficient for the moment." The Indians feel very forgotten by the outside world.