

WHY AYACUCHO?

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The Peruvian American Medical Society (PAMS) is an organization composed of Peruvian physicians in the US as well as other physicians in the US interested in medicine in Peru. PAMS has carried out medical missions since the late 1970's to various rural areas of Peru that have little or no access to proper medical care. They have had a yearly medical mission to Ayacucho, Peru since 1995 and ordinarily that mission was comprised of general surgeons, cardiologists, internists, orthopedists, chest surgeons, ENT doctors, pediatricians and others. Usually the mission is held in the summer (our summer in the U.S) and lasts for two weeks. During that time the team of physicians from the U.S. essentially takes over the hospital in Ayacucho and its' surgical suites for two weeks. They set up tents outside the hospital for triage, evaluation of surgical patients and as a base for non-interventional treatments. The tents and surgical suites are in constant use from about 7 AM until the last patient is seen----usually some time between 7 and 9 PM. The focus of treatment is the poor population of Ayacucho and the surrounding area----those folks who are unable to afford medical care. The mission is similar to medical missions throughout the world. Rarely are psychiatrists invited to be a part of these missions and the PAMS mission was no exception until 9 years ago.

In 2004 it was decided by the PAMS group that psychiatrists ought to be included in the mission because of the large numbers of emotionally traumatized patients they were seeing. The cause of the trauma was a civil war that lasted from about 1980 to 1993 between the government and a group known as *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), a Maoist group that was trying to overthrow the government of Peru. In the late 1960's a professor at the University in Ayacucho named Abinael Guzman had founded the Shining Path. Ayacucho, therefore, was at the center of the conflict. The details of that civil war are disputed as is the blame for the incredible violence visited on the area around Ayacucho (as well as many other rural areas of Peru).

Because the indigenous people in the Peruvian Andes had long been neglected and discriminated against by everyone from the Spanish Conquistadores to the Peruvian governments of the 20th century there was a great deal of pent-up animosity toward the central government of Peru and the Sendero movement hoped to capitalize on that. In spite of the anger of the highlanders toward the government, not everyone was in agreement with the goals or the methods of the Sendero. They were particularly dismayed by the tactics of the Sendero which, as a Maoist group, was intolerant of any deviation from their ideals. The Sendero were particularly brutal and unswerving in their idealism and dealt savagely with individuals or entire pueblos who deviated from their rigid view of society and what needed to be done to change things. The Senderos recruited ruthlessly, mostly in the small rural villages of Peru and, of course, most intensely in the area around Ayacucho. Young men were forced to join the Shining Path under threat of death to themselves and other family members. Those who refused could be hunted down and they and their families killed, kidnapped or tortured (sometimes all three) as examples to others who might resist. Accurate numbers are hard to come by but most would probably agree that thousands were killed by the Sendero in their attempt to recruit guerillas for their cause and tens of

thousands more were killed by the Shining Path in their attempt to overthrow the government. At times Senderos slaughtered entire pueblos and even assassinated other leftist leaders they felt were not “pure enough” in their beliefs.

The Peruvian government was equally ruthless in their attempt to deal with the Shining Path. They sent military troops to deal directly with the Sendero and also used local citizens against the Sendero. They formed paramilitary groups called “rondos” which they armed. They gave them emergency powers to root out and kill Senderos however and wherever they were able to do so. The Peruvian government was also very interested in who had joined the Shining Path. If families were suspected of having knowledge of this and did not give the government proper information about who had joined the Sendero they risked being tortured or killed. Many were simply taken away and never heard from again (the *desaparecidos*). These confrontations were complicated by the fact that communication between the government forces and the rural people was difficult. The government forces usually spoke Spanish and many of the rural people only spoke Quechua (an indigenous language of the South American highlands). This frequently led to confusion about what information was being asked for, what was given and who said what. In some cases, it seems, the government forces simply became frustrated in their attempt to identify and sort out the innocent from the sympathizers and simply wiped out whole villages.

Needless to say, the rural folks in the area around Ayacucho and other smaller towns were whipsawed from both sides. Join the Sendero and face the wrath of the government (and possibly your friends); or not join and face the wrath of the Sendero (and possibly your friends). The toll was enormous. Again, accurate numbers are hard to come by and new mass burial grounds are still being unearthed with some frequency. The best estimates are that between 60,000 and 100,000 people died or “disappeared” during that time as a result of the conflict. One of the mass graves as well as a reputed “torture chamber” was located very near the Ayacucho airport. The present Peruvian government is not particularly interested (and none of the last several governments have been either) in helping to find these graves, identify the occupants or properly bury the remains. Much of the work is done or subsidized by foreign countries (e.g., Germany, Switzerland) and outside experts.

There is a small museum in Ayacucho dedicated to those killed as well as the *desaparecidos* who have never been identified or accounted for. It is maintained by a group of elderly women and an organization known as ANFASEP (Association of Relatives of the Kidnapped and Detained/Disappeared in Zones Under a State of Emergency in Peru). The museum details many of the events of that difficult time.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the conflict affected almost everyone in the area in a very direct way. The threats, the killings, the distrust between neighbors, the finding of mass graves, the attempts to identify the *desaparecidos* from their remains, the failed attempt at a reconciliation process, all have taken their toll on the citizens in and around Ayacucho. Early in my visits to Ayacucho I informally inquired of each of the half dozen or so nurses in the clinic about their experience during the period of “The Violence” (as they somewhat euphemistically refer to this period). Mostly the nurses were from

rural areas because it was required, at the time, that they be bilingual in Spanish and Quechua. To a person they all had lost a family member or close friend and frequently several.

It was because of this recent history and the effect the violence has had on such a large portion of the population that the PAMS group decided in 2004 that psychiatric expertise would be of value. They advertised for volunteer psychiatrists to accompany the regular PAMS mission and two psychiatrists from Yale and another from Michigan went to Ayacucho with them. While there that summer they ran into a nurse who was working in the streets of Ayacucho under the supervision of a psychiatrist from Lima. She had a small office which served as her "clinic" and after some discussion the team from the U.S. and Sister Anne joined forces to begin treating patients at COSMA, the first psychiatric clinic in Ayacucho.