

Peru deploys army in the streets to enforce COVID-19 curfew

By Cesar Uco and Don Knowland
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Peru's President Martín Vizcarra has called the country's military into the street for the ostensible purpose of enforcing quarantine and curfew orders aimed at reducing the spread of the coronavirus, reporting the number of persons infected had reached 395 and that five had died from contracting it. As of Tuesday, the number of known cases in the country had risen to 412, and the number of deaths to seven. Over three quarters of the cases are concentrated in the capital of Lima.

Vizcarra declared a national emergency and quarantine on March 15, imposing an immediate ban on all travel between provinces, and into and out of the country, as well as a ban on the use of planes, boats, trains, buses, and private automobiles. On March 17, citizens were required to fill out an online form in order to obtain permission to leave their homes.

On March 18, a curfew was imposed from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. with the military deployed on city streets to enforce these measures.

Soldier questioning a driver entering a wealthy neighborhood in Lima.

The underlying aims of the restrictions imposed by President Vizcarra are to protect the economic interests of the wealthy, while preparing for a possible armed confrontation with the masses of Peruvian working people.

The deployment of the military at major intersections, where cars and pedestrians are stopped for questioning as to where they are going, is designed to protect Lima's wealthiest neighborhoods.

The Armed Forces are not present in the heavily populated poor neighborhoods surrounding Lima where millions of working families and small traders live. There the local police do not impose the quarantine rules, letting children take to the streets to play contact

sports conducive to the transmission of virus.

Vizcarra announced that the paltry sum of 380 nuevo (new) soles (US\$ 106)—a mere third of the already abysmally low monthly minimum wage—would be distributed at first to the 500,000 neediest families in Lima and the adjoining seaport of Callao, and then to 2.7 million similar families in all regions of the country.

Peruvian workers and poor did not have the purchasing power to buy sufficient food in poorly supplied markets last week, with prices doubling and even tripling. Meanwhile wealthy panic buyers in the posh La Molina district of Lima forced the closing of the well-stocked supermarket of the large national chain WONG.

A WWSW reporter interviewed Felipe, who has a stall at the Miraflores central market in Lima, about market supply conditions and prices.

“I am from the working-class neighborhood of San Juan de Lurigancho and it takes more than half an hour to get to my work here in the central market of Miraflores. There are military personnel here at all major intersections, but there's none for my neighborhood. They say there are not enough military and local personnel. It seems to me that they are afraid or waiting for the moment when people without work and food rise en masse. It's going to be big.

“Where I live there are no masks or gloves. The curfew at 8 p.m. is respected, but young people spend the day playing football in the streets under the eyes of police, who do not intervene to enforce the quarantine.

“In the first week, the Miraflores market was full of people buying everything. Now we're back to normal. Imagine that a kilo of lemons rose from 5 soles to 15 soles, a kilo of carrots from 3 to 6 soles and garlic sold at four times its normal price.

“We are told that everything is planned so that the wholesale market, from where food is distributed to all other markets and grocery stores, will continue to work well and that we shouldn’t worry. But I’m told that the wholesale market staff works without gloves and masks”.

In an attempt to counteract the economic slowdown that is already arising from the coronavirus crisis, the Peruvian Central Reserve Bank (in Spanish, BCR) has taken its most drastic step since 2010, reducing its key interest rate from 2.25 percent to 1.25 percent, its lowest level since 2010. In the last month, yields on Peruvian 10-year Treasury bonds increased by 16.1 basis points, reflecting that the spreads—a measure of risk—of long-term bonds have increased.

Despite such measures by the BCR, analysts are projecting a contraction ranging from 1 percent to 4 percent. The Peruvian currency, the nuevo sol, has depreciated 6.5 percent, making it difficult for the government and corporations to meet loan obligations that are payable in dollars.

A new report by the Peruvian Institute of Economics (PIE) proposes “jumpstarting” the economy through promoting industries “that employ continuous processes” involving intensive use of machinery and equipment, and “little labor participation”, such as the mining sector, cement, glass, and brick-making.

The PIE report emphasizes that quarantine and subsequent measures have suddenly reduced a large portion of the population to a “state of vulnerability”. The report focuses on “a little-studied area within what is known as the ‘vulnerable middle class’, which is estimated at 40 percent of Peru’s population”. This figure is “very large because of the degree of economic informality.”

The report warns that these conditions can produce a social explosion, suggesting that workers must be kept on the job, no matter the threat to the health and lives of themselves and their families posed by the virus. “As far as possible, the government must sustain the continuity of the production of goods and services, and thus avoid the total collapse of the productive apparatus, with the consequent and immeasurable social cost,” it states.

Behind the scenes, President Vizcarra and the Peruvian military, in conjunction with US imperialism, are inevitably preparing for mass repression of the

working class and “vulnerable middle class.”

Even before the coronavirus crisis the Andean countries witnessed uprisings, general strikes and confrontation with the police in Chile, Ecuador and Colombia, as the working class and poor revolted against social inequality and attacks on their living standards.

Peru, whose economy had fared somewhat better than other Andean countries, did not see such mass struggles. But given the economic and social tinderbox arising from the coronavirus and the government’s measures taken in its wake, such struggles are inevitable.

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