

Standoff in Peru

Anxious families await word from inside residence

By **TIFFANY WOODS**
Special to the Chronicle

LIMA, Peru — Elan Solarzano stood on his toes Wednesday, peering over the crowd held back by a yellow tape.

His eyes, on the verge of tears, searched for the slightest movement two blocks down the road at the Japanese ambassador's residence. The 21-year-old had been there since nearly 6 a.m., and now the midday sun was beating down on him. No breakfast. No lunch. No uncle.

Solarzano's uncle was attending a party celebrating the birthday of the Japanese emperor when guerrillas seized the residence Tuesday evening.

Solarzano, like others in the crowd of about 100 gathered several blocks away from the residence, was waiting.

So was Marta Olivares. The guerrillas who took over the ambassador's residence — identifying themselves as members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, known by its Spanish acronym of MRTA — had released her and about 200 other women and

Imprisoned U.S. woman's role with rebels still uncertain

LIMA, Peru (AP) — The American woman was one of more than 20 people arrested in a police raid on a Tupac Amaru rebel safe house last year, and is serving a life sentence in a cold, windswept jail high in the Peruvian Andes.

But are the Tupac Amaru rebels who took over the Japanese ambassador's home Tuesday night, demanding the release of their comrades, seeking Lori Berenson's freedom?

Several of the hostages released Tuesday night and Wednesday said their captors named the 27-year-old New Yorker as one of those the government must release to end the hostage crisis.

Yet, the rebels have not referred to Berenson in communiques since their attack. In fact, they have not publicly mentioned her name since her imprisonment earlier this year.

Some Peruvians have regarded

Berenson as a full-fledged Tupac Amaru member since a secret military panel earlier this year found her guilty of aiding the guerrillas. Berenson, herself, has repeatedly denied membership.

Whether avowed rebel members regard her as a comrade remains unclear.

Berenson worked as a human rights activist in Central America before coming to Peru in November 1994. She was arrested Nov. 30,

1995, in Lima on charges of aiding the Tupac guerrillas.

She was accused of trafficking arms for the rebels and of plotting with them to stage a raid on Congress to kidnap representatives.

Berenson's parents accuse the government of concocting the charges. Their daughter, they say, was unwittingly caught up with a group she believed had sworn off armed struggle.

elderly guests Tuesday night. Her husband remained inside. She still did not know what happened.

"We heard an explosion," she said. "We threw ourselves to the floor. 'We're MRTA. Don't move,' they shouted.

"There was shooting," she said, "and no one dared to lift his head. Then they made us line up and go to different rooms. They separated us, and little by little they began releasing groups of women."

The ambassador's house, which is

located in the upper-class neighborhood of San Isidro next to a medical clinic, is not visible to onlookers because police have closed off the surrounding two-block area.

The residence is surrounded by a two-story wall topped by electrified fencing. A garden separates the house from the wall.

Inside, hundreds of hostages — the exact number was unknown — were divided according to rank, said Alex Kouri, a mayor being held hostage. Kouri told this to his girl-

friend, who was waiting outside with the others and talking to him on a cellular phone.

Police in one room, Kouri said. Diplomats in another. Businessmen by themselves.

"Go back home," Kouri told his girlfriend, Giuliana Cavassa. "This is going to last awhile."

Despite the tension, the atmosphere outside the residence was calm. Things seemed normal. Street vendors sold cones of melting ice cream to onlookers, taking advan-

tage of the hostage crisis to make a little money. Diplomats leaned against their shiny Mercedes sedans. Police officers in green bullet-proof vests stood nearby. Paramedics checked their equipment and supplies. Relatives of the hostages, men and women alike, waited.

Some in the crowd occasionally received calls on cellular phones from husbands or fathers or sons held by the rebels.

Nineteen-year-old Eduardo

Martell Castro told how his father, the ambassador from Honduras, said the rebels had threatened to start shooting if the government did not bring someone in an hour to negotiate.

But the clock kept ticking, and there was no shooting.

Young Castro showed little emotion. "You can't lose your cool," he said.

Solarzano, who was awaiting word of his uncle, was trying hard to stay calm. His uncle is a colonel in Peru's air force.

Solarzano, weaved in and out of the crowd. He bit his lip, crossed his arms and leaned against a car. Twenty-one-year-old cadets in Peru's air force are not supposed to cry. He said the rebels inside were willing to fight to the bitter end. And the government, he said, is prepared to sacrifice a few of the hostages' lives.

"What other option is there?" he said. "If it doesn't end today, the police will take it by force tomorrow. They have to. They are pressured by international forces."

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