



Tiffany Woods / Special to the Chronicle

Peruvian employment remains the main concern of Lima's street vendors. "We want the city to be beautiful, but at the same time, we want our jobs," said one 50-year-old clothes seller who moved to Lima from Cuzco 15 years ago. "If I leave here, I won't have work and will have to look for bread for my children."

Street vendors defy mayor's forced relocation effort

By **TIFFANY WOODS**
Special to the Chronicle

LIMA, Peru — A middle-aged woman stands on the street corner and packs her display of used jeans into a feed bag. A few feet away, six mounted police officers watch her carefully, urging her along.

The woman folds up her yellow blanket, which was spread on the sidewalk. She walks away with resignation on her face.

Shop is closed.

For the past several weeks, national and city police have been trying to clear Lima's streets of vendors, hundreds of whom are fighting back. The removal comes as part of a \$25 million restoration of the city's historical center, announced last month by Mayor Alberto Andrade Carmona.

The cleanup has resulted in the arrest of 58 vendors, the injury of at least six vendors and seven police officers, and riots with vendors wielding sticks and stones. A giant protest April 11 drew about 6,000 vendors who marched passively through the city's streets.

The police have responded to the vendors' resistance by bringing in dogs, a mounted patrol, hundreds of officers, a helicopter and a water-spraying vehicle. Police initiated 24-hour patrols with 150 officers to prevent evicted vendors from reclaiming their sites.

"The street vendors have no right to be in the street," said Gloria Pineda, spokeswoman for Lima City Hall. "They defecate in the

streets, they eat in the streets, they live in the streets. The women practically give birth in the streets. They have practically formed their own capital. It's been like this for more than 40 years. How long are we going to put up with this?"

But the vendors need their jobs, said Ana Maria Robles, 35, a mother of six who sells miscellaneous paper and office supplies from a stand on the sidewalk. She said she earns \$6 to \$7 a day.

"If they boot us from here, we won't have anything to eat," Robles said. "We don't have anywhere else to go. If we had another location, we would go there. But (the mayor) can't boot us out overnight. There are not any sites. They are throwing us out as if we were animals. It's unjust. We're not delinquents. We're human beings."

City ordinances prohibit street vending in certain zones in Lima, while the selling of food in the streets is forbidden in all areas. But the laws haven't stopped Lima's more than 60,000 vendors. The city government traditionally closed its eyes to the infractions, but that changed when Andrade took office in January.

Now vendors are wondering how they are going to put bread on the table.

Hector Sanchez, 42, a watch vendor, is one of them.

"Where are we going to work?" said Sanchez, the father of seven children and who has been selling in Lima's streets for six years and earns about \$11 a day. "We agree with the cleaning up of the city, but at

the same time we have necessities, too. We want them to provide us with another site. Give us another spot, we'll go peacefully, and we'll leave the street clean."

Ten days ago police tried to uproot 2,700 of the vendors and move them to a nearby fairground. Only about a thousand stayed, and they complained about a lack of security. The others are again vending illegally downtown or looking for a new site.

Vendors who have considered renting in legal spots such as empty commercial centers said the rents are too high and the buildings are located in areas with little commercial activity. The owner of one center said the monthly rent for a booth ranges from \$50 to \$120, expensive for a vendor who earns \$7 to \$22 a day.

Vendors have flooded Lima's streets in the past 50 years. Many are peasants from the mountains who came to the capital with dreams of a better life. Others sought employment on the street after the privatization of state-owned companies cut positions. Some have been selling in the same spot for nearly two decades and have cemented their booths to the sidewalk. Others own multiple kiosks in various parts of the city with merchandise valued in the thousands of dollars.

The vendors arrive at 8 a.m. and open up their soot-covered umbrellas. They sell everything from shoe soles to cotton swabs and often someone's briefcase (which had mysteriously disappeared the day before). At the end of the day, around 9 p.m., they

pack their merchandise in wooden carts, which are stored for a few cents in nearby buildings.

This unofficial business has hurt Lima's legal businesses, owners say.

"They take away clients," said Julio Figuero, 35, an employee at a men's clothing store whose entrance is nearly hidden by the kiosks on the sidewalk. "For example, a pair of shoes in a store might cost 50 soles (\$22), but the vendors sell them for 30 soles (\$13). Besides that, they don't have to pay light, water, salaries or taxes."

However, Figuero said, some businesses make money from the street vendors. Often vendors sell the company's merchandise, and the company doesn't have to pay employee benefits.

Despite the attempt to remove them, the vendors are not giving in. On one occasion at 2 a.m., more than 500 police officers dislodged the carts of more than 1,000 vendors. But the next day, the vendors were back on the streets timidly selling the remains of their goods on blankets. Some even sleep in their booths now and have begun to wear identical smocks to show solidarity. They say they are determined to stay.

"If they boot us out," Sanchez said, "we'll return everyday until there is a resolution."

In the meantime, the war on Lima's streets continues.

Tiffany Woods is a free-lance journalist based in Peru.