

Peru MRTA leader: Rebels won't move from original demand of released prisoners

By Tiffany Woods
Bridge News

Lima--Dec. 31--The leftist guerrillas holding 83 people hostage in the Japanese ambassador's residence have not softened in their original demand of the release of their imprisoned comrades.

In an interview with Bridge News inside the residence today, Nestor Cerpa Cartolini, the leader of the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru, said that despite recent statements that show that MRTA is looking to improve prison conditions, the group is still seeking its No. 1 objective: the liberation of other MRTA members in Peru's prisons.

He said they are demanding their release to free them from what he called inhumane conditions. He said that was the reason behind the taking of the residence.

However, Cerpa said that he might be willing to reduce the original demand asking for the liberation of all MRTA prisoners – more than 400 – to a smaller number. He would not say how many.

MRTA has not, however, abandoned its plea to improve prison conditions, Cerpa said. That would fall inside a negotiated agreement to come after a certain amount of prisoners are released, he said. That agreement would be reached before a "commission of guarantors" and could include other earlier demands by MRTA asking for a change in the economic policies and safe passage to the jungle, he said. The ultimate goal would be to end the violence, he said.

"After this situation ends, they [the commission] would have to continue examining our problems, seeking common ground so that there is a political answer to the problem of violence in our country," Cerpa said.

Cerpa did not discount the possibility of leaving the country.

"We are open to a negotiation with Fidel Castro or Boris Yeltsin," Cerpa said. "We have no problem with that."

However, he reiterated that the taking of the residence wasn't because they wanted to seek asylum in another country.

"If I had wanted to leave the country, I would have done it clandestinely crossing the border," Cerpa said.

Cerpa said that the release of the hostages in the past and other actions have been the sole thinking of MRTA.

"The actions that we have made have been our own decision and not a product of any type of concession," Cerpa said.

He said the rebels are not prepared to give up just yet. He said that given the latest statement by President Alberto Fujimori with Spanish news agency EFE maintaining a hard line, he does not see an "immediate solution."

"His expressions continue being confrontational," Cerpa said.

Cerpa's statements came after he invited a group of about 20 members of the foreign press into the residence to explain the rebels' motive for taking the compound.

"What we want to do is to be able to explain and answer some questions," Cerpa said.

As the group approached the front porch of the "Gone With the Wind" style plantation house, hostages stood like mannequins behind the metal-gridded second-story windows. They gave smiles and thumbs-up signs but did not talk.

Three white signs in the windows written in red letters and signed by MRTA criticized inhumane prison conditions. Trash, milk crates, cardboard and empty water tanks were shoved against the windows.

A rebel wearing a red and white bandanna with the word MRTA on it spoke to the journalists through a broken window by the door.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Nothing is going to happen. I know you are nervous."

Journalists handed him their press credentials and were let in single file after a small questioning about the media they represented.

Inside, several young rebels with semi-automatic guns and the same bandannas stood in the entrance. The inside was quiet like an abandoned summer home.

Chairs, sofas and tables were pushed up against the windows. Furniture fabric was torn as if a bad fraternity party had taken place the night before. A bookshelf with prescription medicine on it served as a medicine cabinet. Clothes were thrown on top of standing fans, which weren't in use. The heat rose as more journalists entered.

Journalists were ushered into a back salon where they diligently obeyed a rebel's nonthreatening request to sit down and not to take photos until told to do so.

After several minutes, Cerpa, a well-fed man in black boots, blue fatigues and a blue baseball cap, entered the room. A pistol, grenades, bullet cartridges and an empty hunting knife sheath were shoved into his blue vest. Two young, rifle-carrying soldiers, one in black basketball high-tops, flanked him.

"I'm sure you know who is talking," Cerpa said, his eyes moving right to left, peering over his bandanna.

He proceeded to describe his background as a textile worker and talked about MRTA's origins in 1984 as an offshoot of the leftist party APRA. He said that MRTA is different from the larger guerrilla group Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, which is much more violent, he said.

"We proclaim to be a guerrilla group that, of course, uses violence but that respects the people," Cerpa said.

Then he spoke extensively about Peru's prison conditions in which inmates live in 7-foot by 7-foot cells, see their families once a month for 30 minutes and are inside their cells for 23 hours a day. He spoke like a lecturer, but his speech wasn't clearly outlined. Some points were vague and he appeared not to have clear stances on negotiations and demands.

After a question-and-answer session, he called for the appearance of several hostages.

Foreign Minister Francisco Tudela, Congressman Gilberto Siura and Japanese Ambassador Morihisa Aoki entered the room. Tudela, looking newly shaved, wore fresh clothes, almost looking as if they had been ironed. He held his hands in front of him and spoke calmly.

He said that he has not participated in direct negotiations with the government.

"If you want to be part of the talks, you have to be free, and I am not free," Tudela said.

In a Dec. 20 letter, he wrote that he had supported a peace agreement, but today he would not elaborate on it. When asked if he still maintains that proposal he replied, "The proposals that we make correspond to the situation that we are in."

Regarding statements that the rebels are willing to fight to the death, he was not optimistic.

"I think that is true, I am afraid," Tudela said with a quiet but nervous laugh.