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*In Peru, Afro–Descendants
Fight Ingrained Racism, Invisibility
by Ángel Páez*

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CHINCHA, Peru – There is a saying in Peru that everyone has a bit of either "Inga" or "Mandinga" in them, meaning that all Peruvians have some indigenous (Inca) or African blood.

But the descendants of the tens of thousands of black slaves brought by ship to this coastal city south of Lima in the 16th and 17th centuries point out that this oft–quoted proverb is not reflected in the country's political and social life.

"If it's true that we all have some Inga or Mandinga in us, then why has there never been an Afro–descendant president in Peru in the 184 years since it became an independent republic? Why has someone of our color never been the head of the navy? Why are there no television programs made by descendants of the Mandingas and aimed at them exclusively?" asked the director of Peru's Centre for Ethnic Development, Osvaldo Bilbao.

Bilbao was a participant in the Regional Workshop for the Americas on Strategies for the Inclusion of People of African Descent in Poverty Reduction Programs, held in the picturesque Pacific coast city of Chincha, which was the center of the slave trade in Peru when it was still a Spanish colony.

The Nov. 2–4 meeting was organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and attended by representatives of Afro–descendant organizations from throughout Latin America.

Bilbao took part to speak about the situation in Peru, and was struck by the evidence of how far his country lags behind when compared to the advances made by Afro–descendants in other nations in the region.

He believes that the underlying problem is that Peruvians are extremely racist.

Which is ironic, given that the most popular football club, Alianza Lima, has traditionally been comprised of

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black players; the most widely attended religious event, the procession of Our Lord of Miracles, was founded by Afro–Peruvians; and the country's music is heavily influenced by African rhythms.

Nonetheless, a black person can be barred from entering a discotheque in a fashionable neighborhood, unless he or she is accompanied by a wealthy white person.

"Racial discrimination is structural, not an anecdotal or isolated phenomenon," Bilbao said in an interview with IPS in Chincha, where his ancestors were brought to Peru as slaves to replace the decimated indigenous labor force.

"And the proof of this can be seen not only in the lack of real participation and representation of Afro–Peruvian communities, but also in their invisibility. Here in Peru, a black person is a friend only up to a certain point," he added.

To address this problem, President Alejandro Toledo designated his wife, Belgian–born anthropologist Eliane Karp, to direct the National Commission on Andean, Amazonian and Afro–Peruvian Peoples (CONAPA).

Less than three years later, the commission, financed by the World Bank, was shut down amidst allegations of the misuse of funds, for which Karp is now under investigation.

CONAPA was replaced by the National Institute for the Development of Andean, Amazonian and Afro–Peruvian Peoples (INDEPA), although there is little faith in any real results being achieved by the new agency.

Silvia Villa, president of Peru's Margarita Black Association, said she is doubtful that INDEPA will make a difference.

"We make up almost 40 percent of the total population of Peru, and the majority of us live at or below the poverty line, yet there are only two Afro–descendant representatives in INDEPA," Villa told IPS.

(According to statistics, people of African descent comprise a much smaller proportion of the population than 40 percent).

"In Brazil, the government works with black communities, and there are ministers who are Afro–Brazilian. In Ecuador, there is a law for Afro–descendant communities, but here in Peru, we are still fighting for visibility," she remarked.

On TV comedy programs in Peru, the most frequently occurring themes fall into two categories: jokes about homosexuals, and jokes about the skin color of blacks.

Peruvians of African descent are not the only ones who recognize the discrimination they face.

"Based on the experiences we've heard about, there is still a great deal to be done in Peru," noted Deise Benedito from the Brazilian non–governmental organization Fala Preta! (Speak Out, Black Women). "The state is not addressing the situation. Afro–Peruvians are a very poor sector of the population that is fighting to become visible, while in other countries, like mine, there are concrete policies for people of African descent."

The first Africans arrived in Peru as slaves brought in to replace the indigenous labor force in the mines. However, when they too began dying off as a result of the severe weather conditions in the Andes mountains coupled with the inhuman working conditions, they were sent to cotton and sugar cane plantations along the Pacific coast.

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In Chincha, where last week's workshop was held, there was once a plantation so large that it eventually came to house 30,000 slaves. Today it is home to one of Peru's largest black communities and a major cultural centre.

Ruins of the old plantation still remain, such as the dungeons where the slaves were confined, and the punishment cells with their chains and shackles. The foreign participants in the workshop were taken on a tour of this grim reminder of a shameful period in Peruvian history.

In Peru, the only avenues to advancement open to black women are the fields of entertainment and sports. They are largely shut out from the big foreign–owned chains of retail clothing stores and fast food restaurants.

"In the area around Chincha there are two towns with a large percentage of Afro–descendants, El Guayabo and El Carmen. Neither of them has a public telephone. But people come from all over to see the musicians who live there," remarked Cecilia Ramírez of the Centre for the Development of Black Peruvian Women.

"There is a lot of racism. We don't exist on the political agenda. If we compare ourselves with other countries in the region, including those with smaller percentages of Afro–descendants, practically nothing has been achieved here. If at least the fact that we exist were recognized, that would be a huge step forward," Ramírez told IPS.

"The worst part is that Peruvians don't admit that they are racist," said Bilbao. "There is a policy of hidden racism."

The workshop in Chincha was held as a follow–up to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, which took place in Durban, South Africa in 2001. The Conference concluded with a series of recommendations to governments, such as including Afro–descendant communities in policies on health, education and the fight against poverty.

"It is sad and disheartening to say so, but in our country none of this has been done," said Bilbao.

Joe Frans, with the U.N. Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, noted that in his country, Sweden, the government included a commitment to combat discrimination and racism in its national labor program, while agreeing to earmark one percent of gross domestic product to development programs.

"Racism has two related elements, power and difference. There is a mentality that makes us see others as different, and that becomes a motive to use power to treat others in the worst way possible," said Frans.

U.N. special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Doudou Diène of Senegal, said that the nations of Latin America had been built on structures that discriminate against indigenous and black communities.

"The Latin American countries have not managed to express multiculturalism in power and in government," Diène commented to IPS. "The case of Peru is particularly striking in comparison with other countries. Here there is not even any legal or political strategy to fight racism. There is an enormous amount to be done."

And although the recent week's workshop was devoted specifically to the challenges faced by Afro–descendants, the scourge of discrimination is suffered by both the "Inga" and "Mandinga" descendants of Peru.