

Investigation continues in murders related to sect

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Judicial officials in Peru have announced an investigation into alleged murders within a controversial sect headed by a former presidential candidate.

Former members of the "Nuevo Pacto Universal" (Universal New Covenant Church) have charged that dozens of murders and disappearances and sexual violations have occurred within the church headed by Ezequiel Ataucusi

The group also charged that Javier Noriega Febres, a member of the sect and a congressman is responsible for a "mafia" charged with "bringing justice" against those who challenge Ataucusi.

Noriega was elected as a legislator by the Popular Agricultural Front of Peru which has been linked to the sect.

Government led searches of the sect's Lima headquarters on August 22 and 23 uncovered four automatic machine guns, a rifle and ammunition. Officials also found animal remains in the church headquarters.

Carlos Torres Caro who directed the search said that the discoveries justified the search and concerns about the group. He said, however, that he is not yet prepared to bring any legal charges against the group.

Noriega said that the sect was justified to maintain weapons because of alleged threats against Ataucusi by Peru's Shining Path guerilla movement.

Government officials received the charges in mid-August, signed by thirty relatives of what they called "Victims of vengeance" belonging to the sect. Torres Caro said he has been asked by the former sect members to lift Noriega's immunity as a congressman, making him vulnerable to legal action should it be warranted.

In an interview with a Lima radio station, Noriega said he was the victim of "strange political interests."

"The accusations against the community and its leader are false, and are an attempt to damage the image of a respectable person

Family members reported that 500,000 members of the sect live in a community just outside of the capital, Lima, where they "grow vegetables, pray, and light bonfires in praise to their leader."

A local television station reported that the leader, Ataucusi, has been living for several months in the jungle community of Caballochocha, in Iquitos Department, some 600 miles northeast of Lima.

Deserters said that Ataucusi lives in a community with children, and himself has fathered more than 50 children.

They charged that there are many clandestine tombs in the community used to bury members who have been killed. Congressman Noriega denied the charge.

"I fear no one" Noriega said, referring to the police investigation. He denied that he had personally killed anyone.

Government officials have named Torres Coro as a Special Agent who has powers to enter the sect properties at any time, with judicial permission and police support.

Investigation continues in murders related to sect, *Compass Direct*, Aug 24, 1995

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