

# Rescue From Below

- Dov Levy

On the afternoon of April 22, 1997, the Peruvian government launched a military rescue operation in broad daylight and in full view of the international media. Its goal was to free 72 government VIPs held hostage in the ambassador's compound. The terrorists' position seemed impregnable. Not only had they barricaded themselves inside, but they had mined and booby-trapped the entire compound. There seemed to be no way to free the hostages without triggering a disaster.

But the Peruvians had been devising an audacious and ingenious plan that nobody believed possible: an assault from below...

*Operation Chavín de Huántar—One of the Most Dramatic Hostage Rescue Operations Ever*

Evening was falling on Tuesday, December 17, 1996, in Lima, the capital of Peru. At the official residence of the Japanese ambassador, Morihisa Aoki, major festivities were under way. Today was the 63rd birthday of Japanese Emperor Akihito, a day of national celebration in Japan. To commemorate the event, Ambassador Aoki had invited over 1,000 distinguished guests to a garden party.

Peru maintained deep economic ties with Japan, strengthened in no small measure by the Japanese ancestry of Peru's President Alberto Fujimori. Now leading members of the Peruvian government, including the cabinet ministers, members of Congress and the Supreme Court, police, military and intelligence heads, were invited to join the Japanese in celebration, along with hundreds of foreign dignitaries and business leaders.

When the guests began arriving at 7:00 PM, Mr. and Mrs. Aoki stood at the entrance graciously greeting each visitor. By 8:00 more than 700 people were already inside the compound. Cocktails were served on the lawn as the VIPs rubbed shoulders and shook hands in an atmosphere of gaiety.

Security outside was heavy. Peru had suffered from decades of fighting. Communist revolutionaries regularly, it seemed, attempted to topple the government and install a new social order. The first serious



Pacific coast of Lima.



Emperor Akihito of Japan in 2014.

crackdown on the rampant terrorism had not been launched until President Fujimori came to power in 1990. Since then, the violence had fallen drastically. Nevertheless, the Peruvian government could not afford to let its guard down.

A security perimeter was established around the ambassador's residence. Surrounding the outside of the 12-foot tall compound wall was a team of 50 private security guards. Two motorcycles from *Policia Nacional del Peru* (PNP), the Peruvian National Police, circled the residence continuously. Another squad of police officers checked everyone approaching the residence while a special operations truck from *Unidad de Explosivos* (UDEX), the Peruvian bomb unit, stood at the ready in case of an emergency. At the entrance to the compound, each guest was processed by eight security guards. Names were matched to the invitation list and visitors passed through a metal detector. In all, there were 300 security personnel on hand to ensure the evening passed without incident.

A wailing siren and flashing lights announced the approach of an ambulance that pulled up at the intersection outside the compound. One of the PNP vehicles parked there waved the ambulance on. It drove



Cityscape of Lima, capital of Peru. Right: A typical street scene in Lima.

another 300 yards and stopped in front of the German Service of Technical Cooperation House, a building that backed up to the outer wall of the Japanese ambassador's compound. Two EMTs got out and walked up to the guard at the front of the house. They informed the guard that they were responding to a call from this address.

The guard had heard no mention of an emergency inside and he insisted that they were mistaken. Unperturbed, the two EMTs asked the guard to sign some forms indicating that they had responded to the call per protocol and that no emergency services were necessary. As the guard bent over the papers, the two men, terrorists disguised as EMTs, subdued him. Their comrades had rented this residence from the head of the German aid mission, who was away on vacation. Now they could unload their "ambulance"—a carefully disguised truck that held 12 of their comrades, explosives and a large cache of firearms and ammunitions.

At 8:23 a loud explosion shook the Japanese ambassador's compound, interrupting the ceremony inside. Assuming it was another car bomb outside—a typical tactic used by the insurgents—many of the visitors rushed indoors for cover. The security guards quickly locked the gates to prevent anyone from entering, leaving the guests' bodyguards alone outside.



But the blast was not a car bomb. The group of terrorists had blown a hole along the eastern section of the perimeter wall, using the hole they had entered that backed up to the wall from outside. Now 14 heavily armed terrorists poured through the gaping, smoking five-foot-by-four-foot hole. As they broke out into the compound they fired their guns into the air, shouting political slogans and ordering the guests to lie down on the ground.

At first the guests assumed that the armed men were security guards that had come to protect them. They soon realized that they were mistaken. The armed group



President Obama created a stir in September 2014 when he bowed low in deference to Emperor Akihito during a state visit to Japan.