

PERU - Forcibly Sterilized Women Gain Voice in Congress (by Ángel Páez, IPS)

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IPS - Congressman-elect Alejandro Aguinaga, a former health minister during the Alberto Fujimori administration (1990-2000), as of Jul. 28 will have to share the legislative chamber with rural activist Hilaria Supa Huamán, who has denounced him for promoting the forced sterilisation of hundreds of thousands of Peruvian women.

Supa, who will occupy a seat representing Union for Peru the party that supported the presidential candidacy of nationalist Ollanta Humala — formally accused Aguinaga, elected by the pro-Fujimori Alliance for the Future, of promoting a forced sterilisation programme which deprived 363,000 Peruvian women of their right to motherhood.

The case is currently in the hands of prosecutor Héctor Villar, who specialises in human rights. Sources at his office told IPS that the magistrate is detailing the responsibility of the former health authorities in order to present charges.

When Supa lodged the accusation during Fujimori's administration, she never imagined that her leadership in defence of the rights of women in Cusco, in the south of the country, would take her so far. Today, this poor, indigenous, Quechua-speaking mother is a member of Congress, just like Aguinaga.

Aguinaga said he could not recall who Supa was when IPS asked him about the rural women's leader from Cusco.

"I have just heard that she has been elected to Congress," he said. "No doubt we will have the opportunity to talk. What Peru needs now is development policies and not to keep harping on about the same things (the forced sterilisations), that have already been cleared up and shelved."

IPS told the former minister that a prosecutor is investigating the case and is about to bring charges, and that Supa would propose in Congress that those responsible for implementing the VSC programme should be punished.

"As far as I'm concerned, the matter is closed," said Aguinaga. "We have to take action on issues of importance to the country, like the maternal mortality rate which continues to be high. Reproductive health is the priority now."

Aguinaga also said he was unaware of the status of the investigation he is subjected to by the human rights prosecutor. "I do not know what the situation is."

But Supa is not about to let the past be forgotten. From 1996 to 2000, with the aim of drastically lowering the birth rate in Peru's most impoverished areas, Fujimori implemented the Voluntary Surgical Contraception (VSC) programme. Medical VSC brigades were dispatched to every corner of the country, including the southern Cusco town of Anta, near the rural community of Ollacocha, where Supa hails from.

After surgery, six of Supa's neighbours experienced terrible pain as a result of the ligation of their fallopian tubes. Supa recorded their testimonies, and those of other women in nearby communities who had undergone VSC, and she discovered that in Anta province, the Health Ministry teams were recruiting rural women with false promises or through intimidation.

Supa's neighbours elected her secretary general of the Anta Women's Federation, which launched a campaign against forced sterilisation in the entire Cusco region. In 1999, Supa travelled to Lima for an interview with the then health minister, Alejandro Aguinaga.

"He received us, but he denied everything. He said that the programme was of benefit to the poorest. We showed him testimonies, documents, proof. We even wept in front of him, but he paid no attention. He was very indifferent," Supa told IPS. The sterilisations continued until November 2000, when Fujimori fled to Japan and his health minister, along with the rest of the cabinet, resigned.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, to which Peru is a party, established that all persons have the right to freely choose the number, timing and spacing of their children, and the states party to the agreement are committed to upholding that right.

Between 2001 and 2003, the Peruvian legislative Congress investigated Fujimori's family planning programme. It documented cases in which women had died as a result of side effects of VSC, and determined that the authorities had instructed the medical brigades to sterilise minimum quotas of women in exchange for government benefits.

A first charge sheet, accusing Fujimori and his ministers of genocide, was thrown out because of mistakes in the categorisation of the crime.

However, another parliamentary group, led by congresswoman Dora Núñez Dávila, reopened the case and concluded that crimes against the life and integrity of persons had been committed.

The group also acquired evidence that the Ministry of Health had paid cash "incentives" to doctors and their teams for every woman they sterilised, and that Fujimori's administration distributed food to community dining halls according to the number of women who had "volunteered" for VSC.

The programme was supported by the Peruvian armed forces, who were ordered to provide "security" for the medical brigades. The investigation involved three former health ministers, including Aguinaga, and several other officials. Aguinaga was deputy minister of health from 1994 on, and head of the portfolio from 1999 until the fall of the Fujimori regime.

Aguinaga "must pay for his crimes," Supa told IPS. "I still receive complaints from many sterilised women. They have been abandoned by the government, and by their families. They are still in pain. They can't work. Nobody is looking out for them. They have not been compensated for what was done to them. We have testimonies from more than 300 women in Cusco region who were affected."

When IPS asked Aguinaga whether he thought that the victims of the VSC programme deserved at least an apology from him, he replied: "All these years we have been dealing with the same thing, and I suppose that at some point I will talk to the lady (Hilaria Supa). I repeat, instead of harping on about the same thing (the investigation of forced sterilisation), we need development policies. The indicators are very bad."

According to the report by the congressional investigating committee describing the abuses committed by the Fujimori administration, "Most of the population at which the (VSC) programme was aimed was illiterate and their native language was not Spanish, (but) the papers (the women) had to sign giving consent to the surgical contraception procedure were in Spanish."

"At the so-called 'health festivals', everything from sporting activities to surgical procedures went on, and the aim was to carry out mass VSC. On a single field day, up to 90 people could — and were expected to — be sterilised. The medical personnel who took part in the festivals tried to justify their behaviour, saying they were threatened that if they did not fulfil their work they would receive demerits or even be dismissed," the report said.

According to the investigating committee's document, there have been 18 deaths related to VSC. Between

1990 and 2001, 363,000 women were subjected to sterilisation, "the years of greatest intensity for this type of operation being 1995, 1997 and 1998."

The period of constitutional pre-trial protection enjoyed by Fujimori and his ministers — proceedings in the Legislative branch before a trial in the Judiciary — ended in 2005, so the congressional investigation has been handed over to the National Prosecutor's office.

The parliamentary committee recommended that the alleged perpetrators be tried for the crimes of torture, kidnapping, serious injury and conspiracy to commit crimes.

Supa is optimistic that justice will be done, and says that it is only a matter of time.

"In Congress I'll make Aguinaga remember what he did," said Supa, her Spanish markedly influenced by Quechua, her mother tongue. "When we complained in Lima that many women were suffering pain because of the operations, the authorities told us that that wasn't due to the tubal ligations, but because we were dirty, ignorant and lazy. No more of that!"

Supa, who was among the 1,000 women nominated worldwide en masse for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, does not harbour ill-feeling, but she longs for justice: "For my people, for my children, for my ayllu (community, in Quechua), I will not rest until those responsible pay for what they did. Forced sterilisation will not remain unpunished."

In this battle, Aguinaga and Supa will meet face to face.

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