

The background image is a foggy street scene in Paris. The Eiffel Tower is visible in the distance on the left. In the foreground, a large, ornate column with a decorative top stands prominently. The fog is thick, creating a hazy atmosphere. The title 'THE FOG' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters.

# THE FOG

## Part Two: Occam's Razor

*LCDR Nikolaj Lindberg,  
Danish Special Operations Command*

**In Part One: Scimitar of the Prophet** (CTX 12, no. 2 [Summer 2022]), French Defence Minister Florence Parly and her staff are jolted into crisis response when a radical Islamist group carries out a suicide bomb attack on a French outpost in Mali, releasing a previously unknown and extraordinarily lethal chemical agent. With a deadline of only one week before more attacks are threatened, the Ministry scrambles to determine the nature of the agent and track down the perpetrators. Where the trail leads is more alarming than anything they had expected.

#### Ministry of Defence, Paris [morning, 15 October]

I stare out of my office window. The clouds and rain in Paris seem relentless. It has been overcast for a week now and the deluge this afternoon is supposedly the heaviest Paris has experienced since 1880. I know it makes no sense, but I cannot escape the thought that somehow all of this, even the weather, is connected. It feels unnatural. My eyes hurt, and I can feel my pulse beating in them. I take a deep breath. “It is lack of sleep, Florence, nothing more,” I tell myself. The ultimatum expired yesterday morning. The seven days have now come and gone, and ISWAP have failed to deliver on their threats.

Frustratingly, the intelligence community is feeding us conflicting messages about the new weapon. For all their informants and spies, they have found little in the way of proof of its provenance. For all the hundreds of analyzed reports, tapping of communications, and scrutinizing of satellite imagery, the experts have ended up pointing in two different directions. DRM sees the situation as a confirmation of its initial assessment. Its analysts believe there are indications that ISWAP have not been successful in producing vast quantities of the sulfur-mustard agent and likely are having difficulties storing it. Moreover, DRM does not agree with DGSE’s suspicions of direct Chinese involvement; in its assessment, the relatively ineffective approach of using a suicide bomber as the method of release attests to this. A collaboration with the Chinese state would have meant that rockets, artillery, or even drones would have been used for the attack. Questioning of captured ISWAP fighters has yielded only hearsay and

**This is a work of fiction.** Although the characters are based on actual people, the events are imagined, and the action does not reflect actual policies or procedures of the French government or any other official agency.

#### Cast of Characters

**Captain Sebastian Bernard**

Minister Parly’s Chief of Staff

**Bernard Émié**

Director of DGSE

**General Jean-François Ferlet**

Director of DRM

**Admiral Laurent Isnard**

Chief of SOCOM

**General François Lecointre**

Chief of the Defence Staff

**Emmanuel Macron**

President of France

**Florence Parly**

Minister of Defence

#### List of Abbreviations Used in the Story

**AFSOC**

Air Force Special Operations Command

**BRGE**

Brigade de Renseignement

**CBRN**

Chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear

**CCP**

Chinese Communist Party

**CNOOC**

China National Offshore Oil Company

**COM FST**

Commandement des Forces Spéciales Terre

**DGSE**

Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure

**DGSI**

Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure

**DRM**

Direction du Renseignement Militaire

**ISWAP**

Islamic State West Africa Province

**JCPOA**

Joint comprehensive plan of action

**MINUSMA**

Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali

**QRF**

Quick reaction force

**UNIMAID**

University of Maiduguri

**WMD**

Weapons of mass destruction

**DRM's analysis** is in stark contrast to the report DGSE has just given me. It is terrifying reading.

intangible hints at something big going on within the organization. DRM agents have not found a single enemy officer with knowledge of a larger logistical operation to transport the agent to other nations, nor anyone who knows of an artillery, missile, or drone program to develop means of delivery. DRM deems the enemy to have gone all-in on a bluff that we have now called. It believes that the use of the sulfur-mustard agent is simply an attempt by ISWAP to level the playing field against the relentless onslaught of Operation Barkhane and coerce their enemies to halt ongoing military operations against them. If that is the case, it is a short-sighted solution. Operation Barkhane had reduced its operations, but within days it will be fully operational once again.

DRM's analysis is in stark contrast to the report DGSE has just given me. It is terrifying reading. DGSE personnel have jumped headfirst down the rabbit hole and followed every lead that could confirm their suspicions. They have attempted to track hundreds of misplaced shipping containers with chemical compounds from Lagos, Cotonou, and Accra, only to lose track of them in the depths of the Malian Desert or the Niger Delta. They have found reports from across the Sahel of stolen hazmat suits, laboratory apparatuses, and dual-use medical equipment—usable in the production of chemical weapons—that have disappeared from hospitals, clinics, and universities, never to be seen again. They have found disconcerting reports of ridiculously lucrative smuggling operations to bring unmarked crates and boxes to the middle of nowhere or into the hands of known ISWAP sympathizers, with no questions asked. They have followed trails of money from middlemen in Egypt and Saudi Arabia into offshore accounts affiliated with Chinese front companies in Mali and Nigeria. They have even found an informant ready to swear that he has heard commanders refer to Asians helping them “temper the steel of the Scimitar of the Prophet.” What both reports are sorely missing are actionable targets. There are several mentions of villages in the ISWAP-controlled areas in Mali and Niger, and even references to a Tuareg village

in the southern Algerian desert, but nothing concrete enough to justify direct action.

DGSE will not rule out that preparations for a large-scale attack are underway and that it could be on European soil. It sends a shiver down my spine. I think of my son, Cyril. It could be him and his friends, attacked on the streets. It could be anyone. I imagine the horror of what an attack in Paris with that sulfur-mustard agent would look like. The Bataclan would become a footnote in history in comparison.<sup>1</sup> If the terrorists were to follow Aum Shinrikyo's example and release it in the subway, thousands of people would die under horrendous circumstances. In my mind's eye, I see the explosions shake the underground stations. I see glimpses of people fighting to escape the gas. A screaming horde of drowning, desperate civilians, crawling over one another with blood gushing from their mouths, black tears streaming down their faces, and blisters swelling across their bodies. It cannot happen.

There is a smart rap on the door, the calling card of Captain Bernard. “Come in,” I say, and the door opens. He crosses the office in four strides and stands to attention.

“We are ready for you, Madame Minister,” he says, forcing a smile.

I appreciate the gesture. Everyone is feeling the pressure. “Thank you, Sebastian,” I reply and stand up. “How are you?” I ask as I move from behind the desk.

The smile reaches his eyes and becomes genuine. “Thank you, Madame Minister, not too bad at all. I managed to sleep in my own bed last night and ate breakfast with Colette and Noelle this morning. I can't complain.”

“Good,” I answer, smiling in return. “I am glad to hear it.” I find the thought of him eating breakfast with his wife and baby girl comforting. It is a soothing thought that, all across France, people are still going about their business in the face of this evil. Life will not so easily be stopped.

“Shall we?” he asks.

We leave the office together and walk down the hall for this morning's decision briefing. Over the past week, we have been pushing four lines of operations in preparation for another attack. All law-enforcement units in the country were put on highest alert, while DGSI has been tasked to follow every conceivable lead to find indications of domestic preparations for an attack. In Mali, all operations have ceased except for HUMINT and intelligence



French armored vehicle burning, Gao, Mali, 2018

collection. Every French unit has reviewed its CBRN equipment and procedures, and every frontline unit has received full CBRN warfare equipment. We have been in direct contact with the governments of Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso to reassure them that France is unwavering in her support for their struggles against ISWAP and that we will not sit idle in the face of these new threats. And lastly, we have been working to coordinate military and intelligence efforts with our partners in the US, UK, and Germany. All these lines have required a series of decisions on my part, and every briefing from the various security branches has presented me with a series of courses of action with which to continue. To his credit, General Lecointre is an expert in leading his chiefs of staff. The decisions to be made are sanitized of unnecessary clutter, the pros and cons made clear, and the next objectives on the lines of operation distinctly emphasized. He is accustomed to working with the political level and knows how to cut to the chase.

We turn the corner and walk the last few meters to the briefing room. The door opens to a scene of complete disarray. Everyone is on their feet, staring at the television screens. General Lecointre is the only one with enough presence of mind to notice my arrival. He turns towards me. He has a look on his face like he has been struck. I stare at the nearest screen. It is a TV5 Monde Live broadcast. The pictures are unmistakably from Africa but are as confusing as they are horrifying. The audio is distorted by desperate and hardly comprehensible yelling and wailing screams. The only discernable images are of scores of dead

people scattered on the ground with bleeding mouths and eyes and horrible, oozing blisters.

#### Ministry of Defence [morning, 16 October]

This briefing room is full of charts and pictures. Headshots of what I can only assume to be ISWAP leaders are plotted into surprisingly comprehensive organizational diagrams. Screens with maps of Mali and the broader Sahel region line the wall. There is something slightly more self-assured about both Director Émié and General Ferlet this morning. Yesterday's distraught behavior has been replaced by a more optimistic demeanor. I can only hope they have good news for me.

We are alone, the three of us. The two heads of intelligence have requested a meeting without analysts or staff officers. I silently pray that this is not going to turn into a discussion or another series of mutual accusations. I need facts. I need intelligence and information. And I needed them a week ago. The past twenty-four hours have been insane. The ISWAP attack hit three locations at once. They attempted to hit Operation Barkhane's Regional Operations Base in Gao but failed. A drone spotted a truck moving towards the base from more than two kilometers away. Warning shots were fired and as the truck failed to slow down, perimeter defense subsequently destroyed it. The attack was poorly executed. No injured or dead other than the

**I need facts.** I need intelligence and information. And I needed them a week ago.

attackers. CBRN teams were on site within the hour and confirmed a severe contamination of the area. ISWAP also hit a Senegalese MINUSMA base in eastern Mali. Two suicide bombers walked up to the base and detonated their belts. Despite being bold as brass, the two bombers appeared to have lost their nerve before getting all the way into the compound. The walls took the brunt of the explosion and minimized the spread of the sulfur-mustard agent. Miraculously, given the potential for disaster, only nine peacekeepers were killed in the attack and a further six injured, though the base was subsequently abandoned.

But in Bamako, a suicide bomber detonated a truck laden with gas and explosives in a busy marketplace, not far from the Cité du Niger, the city's diplomatic neighborhood. The sulfur-mustard agent was vaulted upwards and turned into





### The Malian Desert

a lethal aerosol cloud that spread inland with a breeze from the Niger River. It rolled down several adjoining streets, slaying like a biblical plague as it moved and causing a terrible stampede of desperate civilians. In less than 20 minutes, it killed more than 1,400 people and sickened three times as many, including the TV5 Monde crew who were on site. Even as their cameraman began to succumb to the gas, they broadcast scenes of the aftermath to the world, including all of us in that briefing room.

Completely incapable of handling a mass casualty event of such proportions, the local authorities and hospitals reacted slowly. Though rudimentary treatment facilities were erected on the outskirts of town and the contaminated area evacuated and cordoned off, the death toll soon rose to 1,600. This morning, the reports claimed a total of more than 1,900 dead from that single attack. This is an event that will be seared into the memory of the world—an African 9/11—and I cannot escape the feeling that we are at fault. We should have found those devils before this happened. France is better than this, and the two gentlemen in front of me know it. President Macron took the stage only a few hours after the attack and spoke like a true statesman. Composed, but visibly moved by the indiscriminate carnage, he promised not only solidarity with and help to the Malian people, but also to hunt down those responsible and bring them to justice by any means necessary. He publicly declared three days of mourning in France and encouraged the world to remember and assist Mali in her time of need. An hour after his address, he released a statement to denounce religious violence and further the work for peace and coexistence, signed by himself and religious leaders from the Catholic and Protestant Churches, the

French Jewish community, and the French Council of the Muslim Faith.

The entire world has reacted to the attack with abhorrence. From across all continents, declarations of sympathy have been flowing into Mali. In a public address from Brussels, Secretary General Stoltenberg made the defeat of ISWAP one of NATO's primary objectives. In a tactlessly direct fashion, President Putin promised an increase of Russian military action in Syria to grind the last strongholds of ISIS to dust. President Xi declared that China will not only send military advisors to the Malian Army, but also send CBRN teams to countries across the Sahel to help defend against this new terrorist threat. President Trump was comparatively slow to react, and gave a speech that was as cryptic as it was worrisome. In a droning voice, he promised incomparable retaliation and complete annihilation of those who had perpetrated this heinous act, before somehow managing to change direction. He accused the previous administration of not taking proliferation issues seriously enough, went on to criticize the JCPOA, and then left the room without taking questions. The African Union not only declared sympathy with Mali, but also called for a summit to discuss how to protect the Sahel from the scourge of Islamic terrorism. All these declarations are, at least, a step in the right direction.

Soon after the attacks, ISWAP released a pre-recorded message claiming responsibility. They threatened further attacks soon, but this time without giving deadlines. I am incapable of comprehending what they hope to achieve. In their heavy-handedness, ISWAP have shown the world what monsters they actually are and have alienated the few that still supported them. Only ISIS and a splinter group

of al-Qaeda have expressed sympathy for the act, calling for the Scimitar of the Prophet to rain death on the *kuffar* across the globe. At this hour, the world is appalled by their actions and is waiting for a response. France must be the first to move.

“We believe that we have good news for you, Madame Minister,” Director Émié begins. “Our allies in the CIA have approached us with intelligence from a source in Niger. It is a single source, but it looks promising.”

“Good,” I answer. “Don’t keep me waiting. We could certainly do with a breakthrough.”

General Ferlet stands and points to a mugshot of an African male in his late teens or early twenties. “Madame Minister, meet Hassem Abdullahi, a former ISWAP mid-level commander. He claims to have been hoodwinked into the organization. He is from Maiduguri in Borno Province, Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> He is a former student of UNIMAID, the University of Maiduguri, where he studied chemical engineering. He claims to be a devout and non-radical Muslim, but was recruited into a local ISWAP-friendly mosque in 2016, while attending the well-known Bama Road Mosque. Patrons of the radical mosque lent him money for his studies. When he was unable to repay them, the patrons required him to engage in active support of the insurgent organization. He claims that before long, he was in over his head, became estranged from friends and family, and gave up on his studies at the university. He kept operating within ISWAP, but finally fled the organization after being part of a failed attack on a Niger Army base some seven days ago. With Nigerien soldiers on his heels, he took a desperate chance, killed one of his comrades, and surrendered. After interrogation, the Nigerien Army handed him over to US Army Special Forces five days ago, where he has been interrogated thoroughly ever since.”

“Five days?” I exclaim. “Five days?!” General Ferlet’s confident expression vanishes immediately. “You mean to say this man was in CIA custody three days before the Bamako attack, and the United States didn’t deem it important enough to share the intel they gathered from him before now?!”

“Madame Minister,” General Ferlet quickly continues, “the CIA wasn’t sure his intelligence was genuine and has spent this time confirming elements of it. Moreover, like ourselves, the CIA did not believe the threat of a large-scale attack to be credible.”

For a second, Director Émié looks like he is about to interject, but I silence him with a raised finger and a look that could kill. Wisely, he stays quiet. “Well, we all now

**“You mean to say this man was in CIA custody three days before the Bamako attack, and the United States didn’t deem it important enough to share the intel they gathered from him before now?!?”**

know how precise that estimate turned out to be,” I answer the general, seething with barely contained fury.

“I understand your anger, Madame Minister,” General Ferlet answers in a defensive tone. “But it would likely have made no difference at all if they had contacted us sooner. This man has no knowledge of any concrete plans of attack or the enemy’s lines of operations. He is a mid-level commander, equivalent to a sergeant. He has been responsible for various tactical missions, like extortion of locals, ambushes of enemy convoys, and assassinations of critics. Interestingly, however, he was also charged with providing security for some of ISWAP’s own logistics. He and his men have been responsible for protecting a series of convoys transporting heavy equipment from various pickup locations to a small village in the eastern Malian desert. What is particularly interesting is the fact that this man has a relevant education. He was able to identify that several of these transports contained laboratory equipment and construction materials. Some of the equipment he saw is potentially dual-use. When he realized what his organization was attempting to do, he decided that ISWAP’s intentions had become so immoral or downright evil that he could no longer stomach them. He decided to leave the organization and seized the opportunity when it presented itself. The intelligence he is handing us is exactly what we have been hoping for. This man is presumed dead by his own organization, and he quite possibly knows the location of ISWAP’s chemical weapons production facility.”



### The Hexagone Balard, Paris

#### Ministry of Defence [evening, 18 October]

“We are ready for you, Madame Minister.” I nod, get up, and follow Capt. Bernard out the door. We walk in silence to the briefing room. If there is one thing I have always respected the military for above all else, it is their ability to plan and execute complicated operations at incredible speed. It is a mere twenty-six hours since President Macron authorized direct action against the expected chemical weapons facility and COM FST is already set to strike. There are only seven other soldiers present: General Lecointre, SOCOM Chief Admiral Isnard, and a handful of technicians. They stand as I enter.

Admiral Isnard welcomes me. I shake hands with everyone present. “Madame Minister,” the admiral says, “the men are assembled and ready. The tactical orders are given. The connection is secure, and the floor is yours.”

I thank the admiral and ascend the tiny podium they have set up for me. A surprisingly sharp picture is projected onto the facing wall, where more than fifty Special Forces operators are staring back at me from Barkhane’s Regional Operations Base in Mali. They are seated in neat rows in what looks to be an operations room whose walls are lined with timelines, pictures of suspected militants, operations charts, satellite photos, and maps. They are hard-looking men, and they are watching me expectantly. I take a deep breath.

“Gentlemen, France thanks you for your service. The President thanks you for your service. I do as well. The mission you are about to undertake is undoubtedly a dangerous and complicated one. The risks we are asking you to take upon yourselves are not lost on any of us here in Paris. It is



Militants on the Mali-Niger border

specifically because of the nature of this mission that you have been tasked with this job. You are the best France has to offer; you are among the best in the world, and you are, for what you are about to do, already heroes. The horrible attack that hit Bamako three days ago has left us all in profound shock and sorrow. It was an unspeakable act of terror that no one would have believed possible just a month ago. Like the events that unfolded on September 11, 2001, it has changed everything. A weapon of mass destruction was brought to bear on defenseless civilians.



It cannot go unanswered. It must be countered, even if it cannot be reversed. The terrorists must be stopped. France has taken upon herself the burden of ridding the world of the Islamic State West Africa Province. We have taken upon ourselves the task of uprooting this evil. It is of paramount importance that it is we who act. It is paramount that *we* eliminate this disease. You fine men are the fire that will purge this plague. Every asset France and her allies have is now at your disposal. Though I will not be quoted on this, I will allow myself to be blunt with you. I expect you to hit them hard! I expect you to put them down! Destroy their operation once and for all! Bring us the scientists who created this weapon and bring us every shred of evidence you can find. Make no mistake, gentlemen. The world is watching, and those few malicious individuals who still align themselves with this ideology must be thoroughly dissuaded.” Smiles are spreading among the operators. I can sense their eagerness. “I realize that once again the many are asking much of the few. I want you to know there is no fighting force in the world I should sooner hand this great responsibility to. From this moment on, the fate of us all is in your hands. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you!”

I step down and nod to Admiral Isnard, who takes the stand. He addresses his men in a cordial fashion, even greeting a few individuals by name. He keeps his speech short, finishing with the words: “Men, you hereby have the green light.”

I look at General Lecointre. He has a weary smile on his face as we leave the briefing room together. “This is it, Madame Minister,” he says. “*Alea jacta est.*”

The die is cast.

**Defence Ministry [nighttime, 20-21 October]**

It is the middle of the night, but the OPS room is buzzing. Everyone is here. President Macron and I are seated in front of three massive screens. General Lecointre, General Ferlet, Admiral Isnard, Director Émié, and a score of staff officers from all other branches are either seated next to

us or are hard at work coordinating the imminent attack. Four US AFSOC liaison officers are coordinating additional US assets on call. A US U2 spy plane is circling the area at an unbelievable 70,000 feet, feeding us a thermal

**General Lecointre, General Ferlet, Admiral Isnard, Director Émié, and a score of staff officers from all other branches are either seated next to us or are hard at work coordinating the imminent attack.**

and night-vision image of the area in astounding resolution. Two Tigre attack helicopters from four Regiment d’Helicopters des Forces Speciales have just checked in. They are in a holding position some 30 kilometers from the target, ready to be on station within ten minutes upon the Ground Force Commander’s request. Farther out, a US AC-130 Spectre gunship is loitering, ready to add its terrible firepower to the fight if needed.

The reinforced platoon from COM FST spent the first night infiltrating on foot. To take the enemy by surprise and prevent them from destroying evidence or killing possible hostages, the men have opted not to use a HELO INFIL or to land directly on target. Instead, they conducted a decoy operation and attacked an ISWAP-controlled area two days ago, and then proceeded to stage a post-operation EXFIL to throw off any suspicions. They have walked more than fifty kilometers to the positions they now occupy, where they have effectively boxed in the village. With the area under control, they remain undetected. I have hardly been able to sleep for the past two days from a combination of anxiety and expectation. Part of me can’t wait for this to commence, simply so it can be over with. The village, if it can even be called a village, is a group of buildings consisting of one larger compound and six smaller houses close to a hard-packed dirt road. The informant has identified the compound south of the road as the suspected fabrication facility. It is to this place he claims to have led the transports he oversaw. The rest of the houses belong to local farmers. The area surrounding the village is open terrain with very little cover apart from random bushes and the occasional tree. Satellite imagery has confirmed steady vehicular traffic to and from the compound, and the COM FST has verified that there is



a rotation of armed guards protecting the entrance and circling the village at semi-regular intervals.

The battle-captain approaches the president. “Monsieur President, all units are green light. Any objections at this time?”

“No, Major,” he answers without hesitation. “You are clear to proceed.”

The battle-captain nods and returns to his station. Within seconds, the COM FST men are in motion. The U2’s thermal image reveals their figures in stark white against the dark background. They close on the village with remarkable speed and slow to a creeping pace as they reach the rear of the compound. Slowly now, they clear the corners and divide into two groups moving in separate

is, it is vaporized in a flare of gunfire. “Squirter,” one of the AFSOC liaison officers says. “There must have been an underground exit.” There is a sudden cacophonous chatter of communication in the background. The battle-captain approaches. “We have cleared the top of the compound and found a large, functional elevator and a staircase to a lower level. Fifteen enemy combatants are killed so far. COM FST report no injured or wounded.”

President Macron nods with a smile but says nothing. An elevator in a remote Malian compound? Butterflies tingle in my stomach. This has got to be it. More than thirty agonizing minutes pass. Scattered reports reach us of sustained firefights in the depths of the building. A grainy helmet-camera feed flickers on and off with several minutes delay, giving us fractured images of what appears to be a



**I was not joking,”** I continue. “I want you to explain this to me. I want you to speak the words out loud. I want you to explain it and feel how unhinged it is to say this.”

directions. They close on the patrolling guards and the front of the compound simultaneously. A second later they strike, the thermal image blinking with their gunfire. “Shots fired,” the battle-captain says, calmly. The guards collapse. The two groups quickly link up, break open the gate, and slowly move inwards through the courtyard. A door appears to open suddenly. The motion causes the lead soldier to fire again. A man falls headlong out the door. Several more of the assaulters open fire, though I cannot tell what they are shooting at. The train of men pushes aggressively forward. “Contact, wait, out,” the battle-captain says. Both the president and I lean forward. My palms are sweaty. The majority of the men charge forward into the building and disappear from view. A handful of them clear the rest of the courtyard and take up defensive positions.

Minutes pass with no communications. The two Tigre helicopters arrive at incredible speed. They circle the outskirts of the village like wolves searching for prey. After a few more minutes, one of them suddenly peels off and opens fire on something I cannot make out. Whatever it

shockingly sophisticated underground installation. To my dismay, two operators are reported wounded, but the COM FST presses on. At the end of the hour, the battle-captain finally says the words we have all been silently praying to hear. “Target clear! Gold 2 and 3 are Jackpot. Gold 1 KIA. Commencing search and secure.” The OPS room detonates in celebratory cheers. Everyone is on their feet. I find myself hugging the president.

#### Office of the Minister of Defence [afternoon, 27 December]

“Explain the findings of this report to me as you would to a five-year-old,” I say. The demand makes both General Ferlet and Director Émié look uncomfortable. The report on my desk is a massive thing, several hundred pages long. I have read as much as I had time for, but focused my efforts on the abstract and conclusion. “It has not been often that you two gentlemen and your agencies were in agreement this past month, but now you are?”

“Yes, Madame Minister,” General Ferlet answers. “We are. After having assessed all the collected data and material from the installation, after having read the interrogations of Gold 2, Gold 3, and the four ISWAP survivors . . . yes. Our analysts have done a formidable job and we are in agreement. That is why our agencies have co-authored this report.”

“Be that as it may,” I reply, “the conclusion borders on the insane.” There is a long silence. “I was not joking,” I continue. “I want you to explain this to me. I want you to speak the words out loud. I want you to explain it and feel how unhinged it is to say this, because I am the one who must deliver a clear recommendation to the president. Should we share the entirety of these conclusions with our allies? I want a substantiated answer with a yes or no decision.”

The two men eye each other. In that moment, they remind me of children. Director Émié takes the lead. “As you wish, Madame Minister. We believe that the arming of ISWAP with the sulfur-mustard agent was an act perpetrated by North Korea, and that it was supported by agents of the Chinese government. In early 2016, at the end of the Obama administration, Pyongyang decided that it needed to investigate avenues other than nuclear weapons to coerce the international community to reduce sanctions on the country. In the style of the proxy wars of the Cold War era, they decided to supply an organization already fighting against the West with a new weapon system. Or rather, they helped build a facility capable of producing a WMD. They decided that ISWAP would be the optimal choice, as the organization was radical enough to attack its enemies using any means necessary, but was not directly at war with the United States, Russia, or China. North Korean agents contacted ISWAP sympathizers through a Salafist network working out of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and were smuggled into eastern Mali along the so-called “contested route” through Libya and Algeria. Here they entered into negotiations with the ISWAP leader, al-Sheikawi, who happily accepted their offer of assistance. The agents scouted out a location to build a sophisticated underground laboratory and provided ISWAP leadership with a wish list for construction materials, dual-use equipment, and required components. ISWAP leaders agreed to channel considerable funds into the project, under the impression that they would receive a production facility capable of producing nearly unlimited amounts of the proposed chemical agent.

“We believe that ISWAP were convinced this would successfully compensate for the military discrepancy between them and us. By means of deterrence, they hoped that the chemical weapon would provide them with a ‘Caliphate’ to call their own, just in time to pick up the mantle of the collapsing Caliphate in the Levant. Though ISWAP were

able to provide most of the material needed to build the laboratory, they remained absolutely dependent on North Korean support for the chemical agent’s actual fabrication. Simply providing components and instructions was insufficient. North Korea promised to provide experts to manage the production but failed to deliver on this promise. After several failed attempts at smuggling scientists out of North Korea, agents of the Reconnaissance General Bureau approached Chinese counterparts to request help in the undertaking. For reasons unknown, China decided to get directly involved instead of merely assisting North Korea. Chinese operatives planned and executed a staged kidnapping of three chemical engineers from the Usan oilfield off the Nigerian coast and proceeded to pretend they were negotiating for their release. Major Zhang Yuanbo, Liu Mingjie, and Wei Te Dan then proceeded to assist ISWAP in completing the installation, supported by the North Korean operatives, who provided blueprints and know-how.

“The installation appears to have been finished in early 2017. From that point, the Chinese chemists commenced with the production of this new and highly refined sulfur-mustard agent. It seems that production was slower than ISWAP’s leadership had hoped, and that safely storing the finished chemical agent was a challenge. Also, both North Korea and China appear to have been unwilling to provide weapons systems for delivery, which explains why ISWAP had to rely on suicide bombers for their attacks. At some point, the cooperation between the Chinese, the North Koreans, and ISWAP appears to have soured over this question and the chemists became actual hostages. Supposedly, the North Korean operatives disappeared around the same time. Whether they escaped the Sahel or ISWAP made examples of them to put pressure on North Korea for delivery systems, we are unable to ascertain. With shortages of components, production began to run dry. When Mosul fell in July, ISWAP leaders decided the time had come to establish the new Caliphate. They threw themselves into a desperate gamble and began preparing for an attack intended to put pressure on France and the governments in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso to end counter-insurgency operations. When we failed to comply with their demands, they decided to go all in and spend most of the remaining sulfur-mustard agents in the attacks on our ROB, the Senegalese MINUSMA base, and Bamako. From the captured production manifest, we gather that most of their stockpile has been spent. The success of Operation Barkhane’s renewed thrust and the speed with which the Nigerian Army’s campaign in Borno province is advancing these days seem to validate this conclusion.”

I click my tongue involuntarily and Director Émié falls quiet. “It is not that I disagree with your work in its

## Chinese military advisors

and CBRN teams have been welcomed with open arms across West Africa in the past weeks, expanding Chinese influence there even further.

entirety,” I begin in a conciliatory tone. “I understand . . . no, rather, I *fathom* the motivations for ISWAP. I see how they could be misled into believing that ownership of a WMD would be in their interest. But there is a *lex parsimoniae* element—an Occam’s Razor—missing in the conclusions of your report. Particularly the accusations about China’s, but also to some extent North Korea’s, involvement in all of this. It just doesn’t sit well with me. Neither of those two states has any particular love for religion in general or Muslim extremist organizations in particular. Why would they agree to help the most insane organization of them all? Is it not more likely that things are as they appear to be? Is it so unlikely that the scientists were kidnapped and forced to work for ISWAP? Can we not entertain the possibility that they provided the know-how for the construction of the facility and production of the agent at gunpoint?”

General Ferlet raises his eyebrows in ill-concealed irritation. “Pardon, Madame Minister, but we believe not! If you had had the time to read through the report in detail, you would have known that these conclusions were not simply drawn out of thin air! Our contacts in Mossad have confirmed North Korean links to Wahhabi networks in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. We found individual components in the production apparatuses that were produced in North Korea. We have found copies of correspondence between three named North Korean military construction engineers and ISWAP leaders on USB drives, and a partially destroyed North Korean chemical weapons production manual on site. Both Gold 2 and Gold 3 have independently confirmed the involvement of the Guoanbu, the Chinese Ministry of State Security. We have found copies of financial transactions from a well-known Chinese front company to pay for a significant part of the construction materials needed to produce the laboratory. And may I remind you that Gold 1, Lieutenant Colonel Wei Tè Dan, who was formally in charge of the Chinese scientists, seized a weapon off the body of a dead ISWAP fighter and not only proceeded to open fire on our operators but then shot himself in the head rather than be taken alive! The conclusions of this report are not a fantasy; they are not

guesswork. They may not sit well with any of us, but they are the product of thorough and unbiased intelligence work.”

General Ferlet’s face has turned red and his breathing is heavy. Though part of me feels a sting to my pride for being berated in such a manner, I appreciate his candor and cannot fault his arguments.

Director Émié smiles cautiously. “Madame Minister, I understand your concern. You are justified in searching for the *why* in all of this. There are many possible reasons. For North Korea, this operation is likely viewed as a success. We have known of their chemical weapons program for decades. They have mostly used it for assassinations of critics but, frankly, we always believed their large-scale chemical weapons operation to be intended for deterrence by denial. We believed that they would use it to contaminate US bases in South Korea in case of the outbreak of war. They have chosen to use it in a way we never saw coming. They have proven to the West that they are both willing and able to arm our enemies with these weapons. Even if they themselves are unwilling to lash out for fear of retaliation, they know that others may be willing to do their dirty work for them. They know we will not engage in a full-scale war over this and thus expect a low cost in retaliation. On the other hand, they have now introduced another bargaining chip to use as leverage against the West in future negotiations. China, for its part, will categorically deny any involvement in all of this. Xi will likely free-ride the zeitgeist of disinformation and stick to the Occam’s Razor explanation you yourself just presented. Chinese military advisors and CBRN teams have been welcomed with open arms across West Africa in the past weeks, expanding Chinese influence there even further. They have managed to field-test a new and terrible chemical agent on civilian and military targets but still manage to play the role of the savior. Cleverly, they have not provided any means of delivery that could potentially be used to retaliate against Chinese forces in any meaningful way. What changes this new chemical weapon will bring to the great power competition remain to be seen.”

He sighs deeply. “We might even ask ourselves whether their involvement serves an internal rather than an external objective. I would not be the least bit surprised if the CCP uses this whole ordeal to increase surveillance of the population, restrict movement of critics, give further authority to the Guoanbu, and increase the oppression of the Uighur minority.”

I suddenly feel tears welling up and blink them away in irritation. Émié falls quiet. I take a deep breath, clap my

**“They will obscure everything** in a dense fog of falsehood through which the beacon of truth can never shine.”

hands down on the desk, slowly stand, and turn towards the windows. The afternoon sun is shining lazily over Paris. In the distance, a siren wails. “What does one do against such remorseless evil?” I ask. The question is as much to me as it is to them. “How am I to advise the president? We have no tools to compensate for such blatant disregard for human life. France sees herself as a beacon of democracy, of human rights, of truth. It is not just a national motto. Liberty, equality, and brotherhood are ideals we live by. We aim to use our military capabilities to defend and further those ideals. What do we do now?”

I turn towards them. The look on their faces would suit a funeral. I can feel tears running down my cheeks. I don’t care. “We are faced with opponents who will kill thousands of civilians for an advantage. We are faced with enemies who will use any means necessary to tighten control over not only their own nations but the entire world. This is reminiscent of Germany’s actions in ‘38 and ‘39. They will hide behind lies and denial. They will reject, dispute, or simply ignore any proof we leverage against them, knowing full well that we are not interested in another world war. They will obscure everything in a dense fog of falsehood through which the beacon of truth can never shine.”

Director Émié stands. He forces a tired smile, reaches into his blazer, and hands me a handkerchief. “Madame Parly,” he says. “You have proven to be a formidable Minister of Defence. You have handled yourself without reproach during these trying times. I would not have wanted to be in your shoes these past months, and I am confident that history will remember you fondly no matter what you choose to do. Our advice is that you recommend to the president that France share this knowledge with as many of our allies as possible. Even if the consequence is that two separate narratives will come to exist again in East and West, even if this is the first step into another Cold War, it is paramount that our allies be told the truth about the enemy we are up against. We cannot keep our eyes closed and pretend this did not happen.”

I blink and regard him levelly for a few seconds, attempting to appraise whether he meant his little speech as a slight, but his smile seems genuine. After another moment, I nod. “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” I answer with poorly concealed irony.

Ministry of Defence [morning, 29 December]

There is a smart rap on the door. “Come!” I say.

Captain Bernard enters and stands to attention. “Madame Minister, they are ready for you.”

“Thank you,” I answer and look over at General Ferlet and Director Émié. Regarding them, I suddenly remember the long-ago sensation of launching myself off a tall cliff for the first time, into the sparkling water of the bay below: frightening, exhilarating and, once that last running step had been taken, utterly irrevocable. I stand up and move from behind my desk. The two men rise from their chairs as well.

“So, you are absolutely sure that the conclusions you presented to me are as sound as the report indicates, and agree that we should share all the information we have with our allies?” They both nod briefly, their faces grave as my own.

“Good work, gentlemen. I will present your recommendations to the president.”

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**LCDR Nikolaj Lindberg** serves in the Danish Special Operations Command.

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#### NOTES

1. The Bataclan, a music venue in Paris, was the site of a massacre carried out by Islamist terrorists in November 2015, in which nearly 100 people died.
2. The author wrote an earlier piece for *CTX* that tells the fictional story of the young Nigerian man who detonated ISWAP’s first chemical bomb. See Nikolaj Lindberg, “At the Very End, I Smiled,” *CTX* 11, no. 2 (July 2021): 6-15: <https://nps.edu/web/ecco/ctx-vol-11-no-2-july-2021>



## THE CTX INTERVIEW

# General Manuel Alvarez, Peruvian Army, retired

*Interviewed by Sally Baho,  
US Naval Postgraduate School*

**O**n 27 April 2021, Brigadier General Manuel Alvarez, retired, of the Peruvian Army, was interviewed virtually by Sally Baho of Global ECCO. They discussed General Alvarez's role in combating the violent revolutionary group Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso* in Spanish), starting in the early 1980s, and his observations on the current social and political situation in Peru. General Alvarez was commissioned as a first lieutenant in the Peruvian Army in 1973 and retired as a Brigadier General in 2006.<sup>1</sup>

**SALLY BAH0:** Start off by telling us about your military career, which coincided with the domestic terrorism of the Shining Path.

**GENERAL MANUEL ALVAREZ:** My name is Augusto Manuel E. Alvarez Torres. I am a retired Brigadier General, having served in the Peruvian Army for 39 years as an active-duty officer. Following that, I was an intelligence instructor at the Peruvian Army War College for 16 years, which totals about 55 years of service in the Armed Forces.

From 1980 to 2000, Peru lived through a period of very strong terrorism, with two main terrorist organizations operating in Peru: the Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. Even now, there is a remnant faction of the Shining Path that operates in the valleys of the Apurímac River.

The problem with the Shining Path began on 17 May 1980, when it launched its first attack in the town of Chuschi. On 24 April 1983, the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement attacked the police station in Villa El Salvador, which is a district south of Lima. Faced with the different movements and attacks that were taking place, Fernando Belaúnde Terry, the president at the time, did not think that these were terrorist attacks; rather, he believed that they were carried out by cattle rustlers.<sup>2</sup> Later, he said that the attackers were guerrillas, and the Minister of the Interior agreed. Belaúnde Terry and his cabinet didn't know who they were facing; they did not know what the attacks meant or what those conducting the attacks wanted. As time went on, these types of attacks became more frequent and began to look like the attacks of terrorist organizations, as they targeted police stations, ambushed police patrols, and carried out an assault on the central prison of Huancayo to release prisoners detained for terrorism. It became clear that these attacks were more than just small crimes or guerrillas and bandits: this was organized crime.

Members of the Shining Path had been training since 1968. Although they began their armed fight in 1980, they had formed cadres during those 12 years of preparation. In April of 1980, they created the first Shining Path Revolutionary Military School, in Ayacucho, and the first course to train those who would lead the armed fight. This was the first and only graduating class of Shining Path commanders.

In May 1980, Shining Path began a war against the people by burning down a school that was serving as a polling place. They burned all the ballot boxes. Again, the government did not react, so the Shining Path continued to grow and spread through the Central Sierra, especially in Ayacucho. After numerous attacks, the Peruvian government mobilized the Armed Forces in December 1983 and declared Ayacucho to be in a state of emergency.

Here in Peru, we have an article in the constitution that gives the president the authority to determine a state of war in two cases. The first case is the “state of siege” and applies to an external war: in other words, Peru is at war with another country. The other, which is the “state of emergency,” addresses a domestic insurgency or subversion. Both cases require Congressional approval. But I would like to clarify that in Peru, we do not use the word “insurgency” because insurgency is addressed in our constitution. The people have the right to rise against the government, but not against a de facto government elected by the people and supported by the Armed Forces. That is why those who try to overthrow a legitimately elected government and change the structures to a radical ideology are not called insurgents, but subversives. That is how it all started, and it is an important point to understand about the domestic terrorism of the Shining Path. Shining Path slowly gained influence over more and more of Peru. I say influence because they did not control these regions, but influenced them by terror. By 1988, Shining Path dominated 18 of the 23 regions of Peru.

**Shining Path slowly gained influence over more and more of Peru. I say influence because they did not control these regions, but influenced them by terror.**

But let me go back. In 1983, the Armed Forces began combating the Shining Path in the countryside. Because the Shining Path was unable to fight the Armed Forces, it moved to the cities. The group didn’t capture or control the cities, but had a lot of influence in the big cities of Peru: Lima, the capital; Trujillo, to the north; in the south, Tacna on the border with Chile; and Moquegua and Arequipa on the border with Bolivia. In the Central

Sierra, Ayacucho, which is where the Shining Path originated, was considered its stronghold. It also had a presence in Huancavelica, and even in the Northern Sierra, the Ancash region, the Cajamarca region, and the Huánuco region. In the jungle, it controlled the central areas, the department of Cerro de Pasco and the region of Ucayali. It controlled very little in the Amazon. For example, it had very little influence in Iquitos, which is an important city in the Amazon but is surrounded by rivers, the main one being the Amazon. Iquitos is practically an island; the Shining Path couldn’t “act” there because there would have been no way to escape. That is why the terrorism of the Shining Path was hardly felt in Iquitos. The terrorism felt in the other regions included massacres in Lucanamarca, where approximately 80 villagers died, including men and women, the elderly, and children.





**During those two years,** we fought the Shining Path at close range, in the middle of the jungle or in small towns. In one sector of the jungle, they had practically decimated the entire population by machete.

Also, there was the infamous “caravan of death” in Ayacucho. Comrade José, who was in command and drove the caravan of death, went from town to town assassinating people all the way to its destination, where the terrorists unloaded the 63 people they had brought on board, all with their throats cut. And so on.

All of these violent attacks made the government act by deploying the Armed Forces, but at the beginning there was a big mistake. President Belaúnde deployed the Armed Forces under the leadership of Brigadier General Noel Alvarez without any legal protection. In other words, there was no protection for intervention of these forces; the only legal protection we had was military justice. And while we won the military war, we have not entirely won the political war, because there are former Shining Path ideologists in our government who have the support of both domestic and international NGOs. Over the years, certain politicians practically dissolved everything that the Fujimori government had done: they released terrorists, redid all the trials, and began the persecution of soldiers who had intervened in different zones. But that is a story for another time.

As I mentioned before, when the Shining Path terrorists found themselves surrounded by the military forces, they began to move to the key cities. Can we say it was an urban war? No, it wasn't a war, but it was the confrontation of the Shining Path terrorist organization against the Peruvian government. We do not call it a war because it was not an internal war; it was not even an internal armed conflict. It was a violent confrontation by a group of terrorists with the government.

There is a difference of opinion on what subversion means. According to the doctrine, the Shining Path was born as a subversive group. It came to power by using terrorism as a method of subversion. Guzmán [Abimael Guzmán Reynoso] led the Shining Path as an organization against the nation of Peru and declared the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Peru, a communist guerrilla group following Marxism–Leninism–Maoism and Gonzalo Thought.<sup>3</sup>

**BAHO:** Can you tell me more about your experience in the two years that you served as a commander in the fight against the Shining Path?

**ALVAREZ:** In 1989, when I was a lieutenant colonel, I was appointed as a commander of both a counter-subversive [special forces] battalion and a battalion of comandos. It was a great honor for me because there were very few battalions of this sort. We received 111 specially trained troops who were highly regarded. The logistical and administrative support varied; sometimes we received support directly from the joint command, and sometimes directly from the division commander.

In my case, I was a reserve mobile force—in other words, I did not have an established camp; we set up in tents and waited for support to arrive in helicopters. We didn't have distinct special forces uniforms. Some wore the clothes of officers, helicopter pilots, NCOs, paratroopers—they all wore different clothes. When I arrived, the first thing we did was train and train through the months of March and April, until we were ready to move. We followed the terrorists to different areas, conducting counterterrorism operations that, for security reasons, I'm not going to list.

We used the French system of protecting the roads: we set up checkpoints and registered villages and towns, and if people said they were going to visit someone, they were asked why and where. Then we would often accompany them to find out if what they'd said was true. That is how we managed to capture many Shining Path terrorists. This may sound like interrogation, but we didn't have the power to do formal interrogations. Those captured were sent to the top echelon to be interrogated. We only did what is called “combat interrogation,” the specialized interrogation that was allowed by the police and other law enforcement agencies.

During those two years, we fought the Shining Path at close range, in the middle of the jungle or in small towns. In one sector of the jungle, they had practically decimated the entire population by machete. They murdered pregnant women by cutting out their wombs. It was pure savagery.

I can't tell you that I had a battalion in a barracks or in a camp. No. We were a battalion that moved all over when we were required to use our force. We were a very powerful battalion, well-equipped, well-trained, and with all the weapons available to us. In other words, we were operational 24/7, which included combat operations, civic actions, patrolling, and checkpoints, as I mentioned before. My battalion also had the good fortune of having two helicopters assigned to it that could be used for positioning troops at any moment.

Unlike the battalion I commanded, there were fixed bases and from there, the men went out to patrol. They had reconnaissance patrols and combat patrols. And there were times where they had to do those at the same time. In effect, it was reconnaissance: a small force to be able to infiltrate and see what the enemy was doing. If it was combat, it was a stronger force able to make a defensive attack. The battalion had four permanent bases and various mobile bases in the central jungle. We operated in thirds: a third on patrol, a third on surveillance of the base, and a third in rest conditions but ready to go at any moment. Those resting often played soccer while the others patrolled the perimeter of the base.

That was the constant for two years. For a brief time, certain personnel were taken by plane to Lima for R&R [rest and recuperation]. They had to go by plane to avoid any problems on the roads.

The act of coexisting with the other officers was very special—we weren't on a handshake basis. We gave all of ourselves there, every one of us equal. It was brotherhood: brotherhood because you start to love these people as if they were your own children, and when one gets hurt in combat, you feel the love and pain that a father feels if he loses a child.

I am proud because I defended my country. But I never wanted war. I never wanted any confrontations, but those were the cards I was dealt. My daughter told my story in a photographic composition. She has a degree in communication sciences, specializing in photography and videography. She won first place for her photo composition of the photos that I gave her from this time. When she wrote to me, she never asked, "What did you do in the war?" but rather "Did you have to go to war?" It's true, I never went searching for it. But it's as if it came looking for me, like many other officers of my generation.

**BAHO:** Do you think that there is a threat from the current Communist Party in Peru right now? Or that the Shining Path has the potential to resurface?

In the original interview, which was conducted on 23 April 2021, BG Álvarez stated his concern about the continuing influence of Shining Path sympathizers in Peru, particularly in the area of education. Later that month, Pedro Castillo, who ran as a member of the Marxist-Leninist Free Peru (Peru Libre) political party, won the presidential election. Out of respect for the political situation in Peru, *CTX* chose not to include some of Álvarez's concerns about Castillo and the country's leadership. On 7 December 2022, however, Castillo was impeached, convicted, and removed from office for corruption and for attempting illegally to dissolve Congress, thus confirming Álvarez's skepticism. Castillo was later jailed and sentenced to 18 months detention on charges of sedition and rebellion. Increasingly active and violent protests by Castillo's supporters demanding his release subsequently spread across Peru, particularly in the regions where he had the most popular support. Twenty people had died as of 16 December 2022, as this issue of *CTX* was being finalized.<sup>4</sup>

**ÁLVAREZ:** That's a great question. There are several groups, and some are very radical, which could pose a threat to the democracy of Peru. Some political parties have Shining Path members in their ranks. There is a movement for the defense and amnesty of the human rights of the prisoners of war. They call them prisoners of war—Abimael Guzmán [who died in prison in September 2021] and all the criminals who are in jail—but they are not prisoners of war; they are incarcerated terrorists. There is a self-appointed radical faction, the National Reconstitution Committee of the militarized political party, which is a Communist-Marxist-Leninist-Maoist party—principally a Maoist party—that wants to rebuild with ideas from the Shining Path.

All the people feel resentful because for the past 20 years of democracy, there has been corruption. In the past 20 years, all presidents have either been put on trial or sent to jail. In the United States, name me one president who has been in prison. Here, the last four have been indicted. One is in jail and the other three have sentences that could lead to jail time. People are disillusioned by the corruption, and by the lack of work despite the gross domestic product, which is one of the highest in Latin America. Poverty has decreased, but there is inequality. Not like Chile: Chile's GDP is worth the same as ours, but here we have inequality and poverty. If we did not, we would be ahead, economically speaking, of Chile. Professor [José Pedro] Castillo has gained the support of the very people affected by the inequality: the poor.<sup>5</sup> Why does he have the support



of President Evo Morales of Bolivia? Because Castillo is supported by Maduro of Venezuela and by José Mujica [former member of Tupamaros revolutionary group, president from 2010 to 2015] from Uruguay.<sup>6</sup>

**People are disillusioned by the corruption, and by the lack of work despite the gross domestic product, which is one of the highest in Latin America.**

You know that Peru is a very important country to South America's wellbeing, one of the largest and most powerful. We find ourselves now in a situation where many countries in South America are socialist-leaning. Brazil fell to the left, as well as Argentina. Colombia has problems. So, they want to create the São Paulo Forum. They call it the Socialist Union of South America: in other words, the Soviet Union of South America.

**BAHO:** Do you think that those who have power will mobilize to make a Soviet Union in South America?

**ALVAREZ:** [Former Peruvian President Alejandro] Toledo was extradited for corruption and is now in the United States, and they can't bring him back. There's Alan García who committed suicide, a bad man who was being investigated for embezzlement. Pedro Pablo Kuczynski is under house arrest. Then there's Martín Vizcarra, who has been banned from Congress for having robbed the people.

**BAHO:** Are there other internal threats?

**ALVAREZ:** Yes. We have a big problem with the illicit trafficking of drugs, which is run by terrorist organizations. We are the second largest coca producer in the world, after Colombia. The Mexican and Colombian drug cartels are present here, and who controls the VRAEM [*Valle de los Ríos Apurímac, Ene y Mantaro*: the Valley of the Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro Rivers] is disputed. This is a severe security challenge in Peru; as such, the Armed Forces are deployed and are actively combating the drug trafficking and terrorism in the region. This is happening despite the fact that we have lowered cocaine production. In the midst of all of this, the police and the Armed Forces are practically entirely devoted to controlling the main threat Peru is now facing, which is COVID-19. I have to say, governments are in part guilty for this pandemic disaster. In Latin America, Peru has the fifth highest infection rate, after Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, and Chile.

**BAHO:** How is the government responsible with its response to COVID-19?

**ALVAREZ:** Thank you for the question. We want to use the word "guilty" because the government knew that this pandemic was coming in March 2020, or they had some background on it. They could tell from the money being spent. China and other countries began buying masks, various pills, and other medical supplies here in Peru, but it was too late to stop. Masks were bought for 20 cents on the dollar. The government did not realize or understand this acquisition from China, Russia, and the United States. Then, in March, the pandemic comes to Peru and what do government officials do? They lock us in for three months, until June 2020. But what did that do? They did not buy ICU beds. Peru only had 1,500 ICU beds for a population of 28 million people. We did not have enough hospital beds. It was the ultimate government deception. Hospitals were at 50 percent capacity and those who died the most were the doctors, who didn't have the proper material to cover and protect themselves. We reached a peak of 400 dead; 400 is enough. In the United States, 400 were dying each day. But that wasn't a lot, because you have 300 million people. We are only 28 million. And you have a hospital system, a well-established medical system. Imagine here, 1,500 ICU beds but no respirators, no oxygen tanks. Just now [April 2021] we are starting to get them, thanks to the Catholic Church.

So, they locked us up until June, when the cases dropped, and in July and August they continued to drop, but the government didn't take the opportunity to buy what they needed. I hope they can before the second wave comes next winter. We have gone from 1,500 ICU beds to 2,500, which is still not enough.

And now the government is inundated with vaccines. There was a total deception with the vaccines. We were told that the Peruvian government had bought 38 million Sinovac vaccines from China. Later, we were informed that I don't know how many more millions had been offered to Peru. We were even given a name—it was AstraZeneca—when in fact nothing was ever bought. Everything was a lie told by President Vizcarra, and then came [President Francisco] Sagasti.<sup>7</sup> Now the government has bought millions of doses, but the vaccines are arriving little by little.

Almost 750,000 Peruvians have already been vaccinated with the first dose and 500,000 with the second dose. It is expected that all those over 80 years old have already been vaccinated. On the first of May 2021, everyone from age 70 to 80 will be eligible for the vaccine. And in June or July it will be ages 50 to 70, and so on. But that was also a lie by the government; President Vizcarra was dismissed by Congress

and it wasn't until President Sagasti took office that he began to purchase the first vaccines for COVID-19. The people have felt deceived with regards to medical supplies and vaccines, and also the response by the government to combat the pandemic. They were deeply unhappy by the number of deaths due to the pandemic. If the government officials knew about the pandemic problem, they could have lightened the blow. The government locked us up because they didn't buy the supplies they said they bought. They bought lousy masks and lousy equipment, so the real threat in Peru is corruption. On top of that, the congressmen were the first to get vaccines, but this was hidden from the people. Corruption is an endemic evil. That is the problem. So Free Peru [*Perú Libre*: a Peruvian Marxist political party] has taken advantage of this, has advocated for the poor, telling them to go get their vaccine and calling out how poorly the current government handled the vaccine situation.

**BAHO:** Are you comparing COVID-19 to terrorism, the Shining Path, or the response from the government?

**ALVAREZ:** Yes. I think that with the terrorism, the government did not act with the necessary promptness. Like I told you before, President [Fernando] Belaúnde said "No, no, they are not terrorists: they are cattle rustlers; they are guerrillas." When he realized they were terrorists, they had caused a loss of more than \$28 billion dollars, more than 250 transmission towers destroyed, more than 100 bridges blown up, more than 38,000 people murdered.

**We won the military war, but the political war was lost because Fujimori fell and a socialist government entered.**

But as I told you, we won the military war, but the political war was lost because Fujimori fell and a socialist government entered, with socialist ministers who wanted new trials. Of the 24 people who were serving life sentences, only six remained; the rest were released. Those released were given positions, and they work for the state now. So the old people like me are unhappy with this. But the young guys, they think, "What a beast that Guzman is." They admire that old revolutionary because the Ministry of Education is leftist, and so that's what they teach the youth.

**BAHO:** You have addressed this a little, but I want to ask the question directly. What have been the longstanding effects of the Shining Path on Peruvian culture?

**ALVAREZ:** During their heyday, Shining Path realized what the people wanted, so the popular culture favored



Abimael Guzman, aka Gonzalo

the revolutionaries. But from the perspective of the Armed Forces, they won no favors with us. Maybe the Armed Forces lost a little bit of their popularity for serving under the Fujimori government. But it was restored after two or three years, due to the actions that were carried out by the Armed Forces in their new role of helping the people. The Armed Forces come in during disasters and threats, and they have helped the people with helicopters and trucks, going out to the hospitals in the countryside to face COVID. This made the Armed Forces the third most trusted group in Peru: first, the media, then the Catholic Church, and third, the Armed Forces. So, the Shining Path, instead of lowering the trust in the Armed Forces, actually raised it, because we did not make a peace accord. We did not make any peace agreement. We fought to the end. It affected the culture because people were afraid. There was excess on our part, as well, and those officers who committed those acts are in jail.

But now we have the population divided about the Communist Party, especially among the young, between 18 and 25 years old, who did not live through the terrorism. For them, there was no terrorism; there was no internal war; they deny that the terrorists massacred people. They say the terrorists are political prisoners, and to that I say no, I'm sorry, they are prisoners of war. It's like denying the Holocaust, as Iran does. It's the same for these youths:

**Fortunately,** not very many politicians are members of the Shining Path. But it is still something. Isn't it dangerous that there are members of the Shining Path still working for government institutions?

they deny it, with the help of the government, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture. The schools do not teach what they should teach; instead, they favor their leftist interests. Here in Peru, we call them "caviar." A caviar is a leftist person who lives very well, in the best areas of Lima.

**BAHO:** Am I understanding correctly that there continues to be a division between those who support the Armed Forces and those who support the Shining Path?

**ALVAREZ:** Shining Path did not just pop up out of nowhere. Everyone knows what it did.

But, as I told you, it is the sector

of youth that we call *pulpines*.<sup>8</sup> They don't know what terrorism is. They think the Shining Path is a political party because that is what their teachers instilled in them. But people 30, 40, and older know all about it and not one of them wants the terrorism to return. There has never been a case as divisive as this: supporters of the guerrilla movement versus supporters of the Armed Forces. No, here the support for the Armed Forces has always been strong.



**Shining Path School**

**BAHO:** Are the political parties in Peru polar opposites, or binary?

**ALVAREZ:** Thankfully no, not here. There is a variety of parties. But the problem is that people don't care. In the primary elections, many people, instead of voting, went to the beach; they went and had their BBQs; they sunbathed; they didn't care; and then they are surprised by the results.

**BAHO:** What are the Armed Forces or the National Police doing currently to combat the Shining Path? What has been successful?

**ALVAREZ:** In the year 2000, through the famous pacification strategies, it was possible to defeat the Shining Path. But that policy was not continued because the Toledo government had many leftist members. They abolished what the military judges had done. This goes to show the important role that political wars play in support of military wars. Lately, there have been very well-done operations by the Armed Forces where they have captured or neutralized elements of the Shining Path in the VRAEM. The latest one was the Shining Path's second in command, who died of wounds and a kidney problem. Not to mention the reconnaissance and observation actions of the Armed Forces in the VRAEM: in two separate police operations, 72 and 56 members of the Shining Path who had infiltrated MOVADEF were arrested.<sup>9</sup> But most were released by the Public Ministry. They said it was due to a lack of evidence.

So, there are operations that are successful, but the circle is not closed because the Public Ministry sometimes does not comply as it should. So the operations



that are carried out by the police and Armed Forces look a bit forced, or calculated. Fortunately, not very many politicians are members of the Shining Path: maybe only four or five. But it is still something. Isn't it dangerous that there are members of the Shining Path still working for government institutions? Another problem is that universities are being infiltrated by Shining Path members and they are practically brainwashing young people again. Not to mention that the Court of Justice in the Hague ordered Peru to compensate each terrorist who is released from prison who had not been tried.

**BAHO:** Thank you for your time, General Alvarez.

#### ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

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#### NOTES

1. This interview was conducted in Spanish and translated by Sally Baho. It has been edited for length and clarity. Every effort was made to ensure that the meaning and intention of the participants were not altered in any way. The ideas and opinions of all participants are theirs alone and do not represent the official positions of the US Naval Postgraduate School, the US Department of Defense, the US government, or any other official entity.
2. The word in Spanish is *abigeos*, which means "cattle rustler" in South America.
3. "Gonzalo Thought is a social and political theory originated by Abimael Guzman (also called 'Gonzalo'), who was the chairman of the Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path. It proposes following the military line of struggle, by militarization and concentric construction of the party. Gonzalo also believed that such a revolution in a single country could spark a world revolution." Urban Dictionary, s.v. "Gonzalo Thought," last modified 29 January 2022: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Gonzalo%20Thought>
4. Augusto Álvarez Torres, "Crónica de un suicidio por Augusto Álvarez Torres (OPINIÓN)" ("Chronicle of a Suicide by Augusto Álvarez Torres, OPINION") (in Spanish), *Diario Correo*, 12 December 2022: <https://diariocorreo.pe/opinion/cronica-de-un-suicidio-por-augusto-alvarez-torres-opinion-noticia/>; Marco Aquino, "Peru Declares State of Emergency, Seeks 18-Months Jail for Castillo," *Reuters*, 14 December 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peru-top-court-mulls-detaining-ex-president-castillo-18-months-2022-12-14/>; and Caitlin Hu and Claudia Rebaza, "Peru's Ex-President Castillo to be Jailed for 18 Months as Protesters Declare 'Insurgency,'" *CNN*, 15 December 2022: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/15/americas/peru-castillo-detention-intl-latam/index.html>
5. José Pedro Castillo Terrones, known as "El Profesor" because he had been a schoolteacher, was elected as Peru's president and took office in July 2021.
6. Pedro Castillo won the presidential election in July 2021. He was impeached and removed from office on 7 December 2022 on charges of corruption and after attempting illegally to dissolve parliament. Castillo was arrested on 14 December as he tried to flee the country and remains in custody. Marco Aquino, "Peru declares state of emergency, seeks 18-months jail for Castillo," *Reuters*, 14 December 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peru-top-court-mulls-detaining-ex-president-castillo-18-months-2022-12-14/>
7. President Francisco Sagasti was in office from November 2020 to July 2021.
8. The word *pulpín* comes from a Peruvian labor law that addressed 18- to 24-year-olds in Peru. The word derives from a box juice called "Pulp," and refers to the segment of the population that grew up drinking this juice. In this context, it refers to the newest wave in the labor and voting population, which did not experience the violence of the Shining Path.
9. MOVADef, the Movement for Amnesty and Fundamental Rights, is a political organization that has been linked to the Shining Path. See, for example, Lauren Villagran, "Is Peru's History of Terrorism Coming Back to Haunt It?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 August 2013: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2013/0805/Is-Peru-s-history-of-terrorism-coming-back-to-haunt-it>