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Talking tough to terrorists

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LAST week: In what is reportedly the first time a Malaysian ambassador has been held hostage, Ahmad Mokhtar Selat is captive - at the Lima residence of Japan's ambassador - of Peru's Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. Now, read on ...

THE residence of Japan's ambassador has been chosen, guerillas explain, "due to the constant meddling of the Japanese Government in Peru." They protest Tokyo's support for Fujimori - son of Japanese immigrants - and his economic policies.

Throughout the furore, Fujimori himself - famed for his strong-arm tactics - has remained ominously tight-lipped. By Dec 20, his government has yet to officially establish negotiations with guerillas.

It has not, however, been idle.

Police have cordoned off the elegant residence. Television coverage is restricted to outside walls. Nine hundred special and intelligence agents take up positions. On Dec 25, reports surface that crack Peruvian troops have hatched a provisional plan of attack. Conversations inside the besieged building are being picked up by surveillance teams with electronic eavesdropping devices. Telephone lines, and supplies of water and electricity, have been cut to wear down the guerillas.

But it is the hostages who suffer.

"No water, no food," they scrawl on a sign they hold up to a window. Staggering heat and smelly toilets assail them. "Mr President," they write in desperation, "order the reconnection of water, light and telephone."

A rift reportedly surfaces between Japan and Peru. Japan - which was not told in advance, it rumbles discontentedly, about the disconnection of electricity supplies to what is technically Japanese territory - stresses the safety of hostages; Peru insists on having no truck with terrorism.

Finally, on Dec 21, Fujimori responds - harshly.

"You hope for dialogue," he tells guerillas, "by placing an AKM rifle to the necks of hostages."

"My government is not prepared to accept that the force and violence of a terrorist command can be imposed on 23 million people who reject these methods."

"The proposal is concrete," he counter-demands. "That captors surrender their weapons to a guarantor committee and release all hostages without exception."

"In this way, the possibility of force by the Peruvian State will be ruled out."

In a gesture of solidarity with hostages, Japan's Imperial Palace will cancel celebrations planned to mark Emperor Akihito's birthday. Director of Information Services at Japan's Embassy in Kuala Lumpur Motokatsu Watanabe explains that receptions at her embassies worldwide will also be dispensed with. "No one," he says sombrely, "is in the mood to celebrate."

Malaysia will not denounce Fujimori's uncompromising stand. "If we give too much advice," says Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir sagely, "there will be confusion."

"We leave it to the Peruvian Government."

Malaysia's Foreign Minister is nevertheless despatched to Lima. In a courtly exchange, he and Ahmad Mokhtar exchange letters which strike all the right notes.

"All possible steps are being taken," writes Datuk Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi, "to secure your release and that of the other hostages."

"Please convey my heartfelt thanks to the Government and people of Malaysia," replies Ahmad Mokhtar, "for their concern for my safety."

There is no lack of hostage heroism. Victor Lucero - a doctor - renders aid to comrades in captivity. Morihisa volunteers to remain as sole hostage; rebels reject the offer. And Cuba's ambassador Pedro Diaz Arcia and United Nations representative Jakob Simonsen are selected for freedom - but refuse, citing an "ethical responsibility" for more minor diplomats incarcerated.

Ironically, hostages include the president of Peru's Supreme Court, Moises Pantoja, as well as Carlos Dominguez and Maximo Rivera - past and present chiefs of the Anti-Terrorism Police!

Also captive is Pedro Fujimori - brother of the President.

By Dec 28, guerillas are weakening. Offering to "withdraw from the occupied residence by way of dialogue," they ask the public to "reflect" on the conditions to which their imprisoned comrades are subject.

The same day, without warning, Ahmad Mokhtar is released.

"I was reading a magazine when a guerilla told me to put on my coat. We walked to the front door, where two other hostages were waiting ...

"And I knew that freedom had come."

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