

## Peru's government forced sterilization on 300,000 women

EDMONTON - Hilaria Supa Huaman is almost whispering as she tells how most of the women in her remote Peruvian village came to be sterilized.

The renowned 46-year-old peace activist, in Edmonton to speak at a University of Alberta human rights conference, presses her arthritic hands deep into her lap and sighs before explaining how government health workers coerced more than 300,000 poor indigenous women into having tubal ligations.

She said impoverished Quechuan families in isolated communities were bribed with food and false promises of free education for their children.

The health workers, who had quotas to meet as part of a government drive to sterilize Peru's poorest women, climbed high into the Andes and told illiterate men their wives needed surgery immediately. They didn't say why.

Some families were told they would be fined if they had more children. Some women who went to hospitals to have babies left unable to bear more.

"Now the women are sick," Huaman said. The surgeries were done poorly -- most were conducted without a proper anesthetist -- and often left women with infections that lasted for months.

"After the surgery, they can't work like they used to, and so there has been an increase in family violence. Both men and women have to work to survive, and when women can't work the men beat them or leave them.

"Everyone feels tricked."

Huaman said the women live in poverty, but they support themselves and never asked for help.

"Emotionally, for the women, it is a profound trauma that no money in the world can fix," she said.

"They suffer silently, ask themselves: 'Why was this done to me? Why me?'"

Former president Alberto Fujimori initiated the family planning program in 1994 and passed laws making sterilization legal. In 2000, he fled Peru for Japan after charges of wide-reaching corruption in his government began to emerge.

A 2002 report released by Peru's health ministry acknowledged the mass forced sterilization. More than 500 people told the commission stories of deception and bribery,

leading the health minister to say Fujimori and other high-ranking ministers could be held responsible for human rights violations.

But Huaman has more practical things to worry about.

"What we are asking for is that the women get the medical attention they need, because they weren't given any help when they were sterilized," she said.

"We have asked the (Peruvian health) ministry, and nothing has happened. If the World Bank, the U.S., Japanese and Peruvian governments all put money into this family planning program, they need to put money in to fix the health of the people who were affected.

"All we want is justice."

*Source: Edmonton Journal (Alberta), November 12, 2004.*