

Rights group denounces brutal protest crackdown in Peru

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Protesters in Lima, Peru, lie on the ground in red-splattered shirts to protest the government of President Dina Boluarte in February [File: Alessandro Cinque/Reuters]

New York, April 27 (RHC)-- Peru's police and military have violently suppressed recent anti-government protests, resulting in deaths that likely amount to "extrajudicial or arbitrary killir international law, according to a new 107-page report from the nonprofit Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"We have found conclusive evidence that police and military in Peru used disproportionate, indiscriminate and brutal force against protesters and bystanders," César Muñoz, the Americas associate director at

HRW, told Al Jazeera. “We can say that with certainty.”

The report, released on Wednesday, comes nearly five months after widespread demonstrations erupted across Peru, following the impeachment and arrest of then-President Pedro Castillo in December. After reviewing autopsy and ballistic reports as well as health records, HRW found that most of the protester and bystander deaths were the result of gunshot wounds.

Of the 49 civilians killed during clashes with security forces from December through February, the nonprofit found that 39 died from firearms, and five more were killed by “pellets fired from shotguns”. According to Muñoz, police, in some cases, used a type of lead pellet that contravened Peruvian law.

“The national police of Peru have approved pellets for use in crowd control operations,” Muñoz said. “But those pellets are supposed to be made of rubber.” One civilian, 22-year-old Rosalino Florez, was shot more than 30 times with pellets on January 11. He died this past March after nearly two months in the hospital.

Another protester, Víctor Santisteban Yacsavilca, was killed on January 28 when a police officer used a riot gun to launch what appeared to be a tear gas canister at a group of protesters in the capital Lima.

“It really saddens me as a person, as a human being, as a sister... to see that we live in a country where there is no justice,” his sister Elizabeth Santisteban said. “It really makes me very sad that 60 lives are worthless to this corrupt government,” she added, using an estimate for the overall death toll from the protests.

The protesters have issued a broad range of demands. Some have called for the release of Castillo, who faces charges of “rebellion” for attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree in the face of a third impeachment hearing on December 7th.

Other demands include new elections, the dissolution of Congress and the resignation of President Dina Boluarte, the former vice president under Castillo and the first woman to assume the top role in Peru’s government.

A February survey from the Institute of Peruvian Studies showed Congress had a disapproval rating of 90 percent, while the president’s disapproval rating was at 77 percent. While Boluarte has apologised and expressed “regret” for the deaths, she has stopped short of resigning.

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