

Amazon Indians declare 'insurgency' against Peru

By ANDREW WHALEN –

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Amazon Indians who have been blocking roads, waterways and a state oil pipeline since April are declaring an "insurgency" against Peru's government for refusing to repeal laws that the protesters say make it easier for foreign companies to take their lands, a national Indian representative said Friday.

Peruvian officials warned that Indians participating in any uprising could be charged with sedition.

The Indians contend the laws — passed with special powers granted to President Alan Garcia to implement **the Peru-U.S. free trade pact that went into affect in February** — open the door to privatization of their communal jungle lands and water resources for oil drilling, logging, mining and large-scale farming.

Alberto Pizango, president of the Peruvian Jungle Inter-Ethnic Development Association, said the insurgency declaration means the Indians "refuse to recognize the authority" of the government. Instead, they will obey their ancestral laws and view any government security forces on their lands as an "external aggression."

The government "wants to take our lands and hand them over to giant multinationals for the oil, lumber, gold and other riches there that are coveted by the world's rich," said Pizango, who met with chief Cabinet Minister Yehude Simon on Wednesday in a failed effort to resolve the dispute.

President Alan Garcia has prioritized foreign oil investment in the Amazon, where the government owns the rights to underground resources. Indians say his government does not consult them in good faith before signing contracts with oil companies.

A Duke University study published last year said contract blocks for oil and gas exploration cover approximately 72 percent of Peru's rainforest.

Pizango said the Indians are willing to give their lives to defend the land and will radicalize protests that include at least 30,000 Indians across six provinces. Indians have clashed with police while blocking highways, waterways, airports and the flow of oil in a state pipeline.

Garcia declared a state of emergency and suspended some constitutional rights in four jungle provinces May 9, a month after the Indians began their protests. Justice Minister Rosario Fernandez said Friday that Indians participating in the insurgency face five to 10 years in prison for sedition.

Human rights and environmental groups, Peru's ombudsman office and nine Roman Catholic bishops stationed in the Amazon side with the Indians, calling for the repeal of the laws. They say the government should respect an International Labor Organization accord protecting Indians' right to consultation on the use of their lands.

Congress is set to debate the issue next week.