

Introduction

Known as a country of stark contrasts and quiet beauty, Peru is a nation of welcoming people, desert beaches, snow-covered peaks, tropical rivers, architectural wonders and ancient civilisations. Potentially a rich country, more than half the population live in poverty.



History

Peru was part of the highly developed Inca civilisation which stretched from northern Ecuador to central Chile. The Spanish, led by Francisco Pizarro, landed in the area in 1531 searching for Inca wealth and found a civilisation weakened by civil war. A year later they captured and executed the Inca Emperor and by 1535 had founded the city of Lima, which became the centre of Spanish expansion and domination in western South America.

Attempts to establish a colonial government were met with resistance, but by 1542 the Viceroyalty of Peru was established. Peruvian gold and silver made the country an important contributor to Spanish wealth and power in South America. However, much of Spanish wealth was built on the backs of enforced Inca Indian labour and millions of Indians lost their lives during Spanish rule. In 1532 the Indian population was about nine million; a hundred years later it was only 600,000.

In 1821 Peru declared its independence from Spain and for the next few decades Spain attempted to regain its former colony but by 1879 was forced to recognise Peru's independence.

It wasn't only with the Spanish army that Peru was in conflict. A dispute with Chile in 1879 resulted in Peru losing territory and its capital city being occupied by the Chilean army. The dispute was finally settled in 1929.

The 20th century was marked by alternations between democracy and military dictatorships and by boundary disputes with Colombia and Ecuador. Towards the end of the century, a brutal conflict erupted between Maoist rebels and the Peruvian government. An estimated 69,000 people lost their lives in the war.

Despite extensive development in the late 19th century, and attempts to introduce economic and social change in the second part of the 20th century, Peru has suffered economically, resulting in widespread poverty. Alejandro Toledo, the current president of Peru, has promised to wage war on poverty. However, his presidency has been hampered by allegations of corruption.

Current challenges

- ▶ About 54 per cent of Peruvians live in extreme poverty, earning less than US\$1 (51 pence) a day, with Peru's inland regions suffering the most. A small elite of Spanish descent own most of the country's wealth.
- ▶ Peru's government has been marked by mismanagement and corruption. An anti-corruption commission is investigating the current president's finances after accusations of corruption and authoritarianism.
- ▶ Peru is one of the top three countries in the world that produce coca, cultivating about 44,200 hectares of the plant. The dried leaves of coca are processed for cocaine and other alkaloids. Over 200,000 rural Peruvians are involved in coca's cultivation, creating a major problem for the government intent on tackling the trafficking of the drug.

BMS involvement in Peru

BMS World Mission is partnering with the Peruvian Baptist Convention (PBC) in the areas of holistic mission to deprived urban communities and lay mission leader training, to strengthen the mission witness of their churches. Margaret Swires, a BMS long-term worker, is involved in this work in Lima. Mid-termers Paul and Rachel Elliston are in Chincha assisting in relief efforts from the 2007 earthquake.

Background information

Situated in south west of Latin America, Peru (496,22 square miles) shares its borders with Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia and Chile. To the west is the Pacific Ocean, which stretches along 1,900 miles of Peru's shoreline. The high peaks and steep canyons of the Andes Mountains (la sierra) separate the western coastal plains (la costa) from the eastern lowland jungles of the Amazon Basin (la selva).

Peru is divided into 26 regions with a population of over 27 million. Almost half of the population are Indian, a third are Mestizo (a mix between Amerindian and white), and ten per cent are of European origin. About a quarter of the population live in Lima, the capital city, while millions of highland Indians, who speak the ancient language of Quechua and follow a traditional way of life, live in the Peruvian Andes.

At 3,821 metres, Lake Titicaca is the world's highest navigational lake and is found on the border between Bolivia and Peru. The country is one of the ten most megadiverse countries in the world and has many protected natural areas.

Peru is rich in deposits of copper, silver, lead, zinc, oil and gold and mining represents over 45 per cent of the country's total exports.

Religion

About 90 per cent of the Peruvian population claim to be Christians, of whom nearly 70 per cent are Catholic. The 1978 constitution guarantees religious freedom but because it recognises the Catholic Church's role as "an important element in the historical, cultural, and moral development of the nation", Catholics receive preferential treatment

especially in education and tax benefits. Non-Catholics are often discriminated against.

Even though high numbers of people claim to be Christian, only 15 per cent of Catholics attend church regularly and often indigenous traditions have tended to become assimilated into Christian practice. Also, there has been a notable increase in pre-Hispanic religions.

Despite the decline in church attendance in the Catholic Church, evangelical churches have grown dramatically even though they frequently face persecution. In 1980 evangelicals made up 2.9 per cent (500,000) of the population, by 2000 this had increased to 8.7 per cent (2.2 million).

There are about 155 Baptist churches in Peru with a total membership of 10,000.

Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the Holy Spirit to revive the Church and that mature and trained leaders will disciple congregations into depth of relationship with Christ and lead many into the kingdom of God.
- ▶ Pray for a stable, effective government that will take a stand against corruption, an unfair judicial system, racism and discrimination.
- ▶ Pray for the government to develop a sustainable, beneficial and ethical economic policy that will improve the lives of millions of Peruvians who live in poverty.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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