On Tuesday, February 22, 2005, the GW Center for Latin American Issues and the Embassy of Peru hosted a presentation by the First Lady of Peru, Dr. Eliane Karp de Toledo, on: “Emerging Democracies and Indigenous Peoples, A Peruvian Perspective.” Dr. Karp is a noted anthropologist who has devoted much of her life on working with organizations such as the European Investment Bank, the World Bank, USAID, and the OAS to reduce global poverty. The conference was sponsored in part by Delta Air Lines; Madhu Pisco LLC; The Maple Companies; Newmont Mining Corporation; PSE & G Americas; Schmeltzer, Aptaker, and Shepard; and the U.S. Department of Education.

Democratic under-representation of indigenous peoples takes a unique form in Peru because indigenous peoples form a majority of the population; we are not dealing, therefore, simply with a question of minority rights. The social exclusion of these groups has manifested itself in lives lived entirely outside of the formal economic and social structures. Research has shown a direct correlation between poverty and indigenous background. Dr. Karp affirmed that the problem is so great that it can be solved only by the creation of a new social compact that emphasizes good governance and equality in the distribution of goods and services.

One of the issues involved in indigenous rights is the question of quantifying the relevant population and determining to whom this title refers, a task that has proved troublesome in Peru. Differing measures have created legal, cultural, and linguistic criteria for determining one’s indigenous status; when all three measures are considered, approximately one-third of the Peruvian population may be considered indigenous.

Dr. Karp noted the attempts at cultural homogenization begun during the colonization of Peru, and that have continued nearly until the present. She asserted that this process has been a destructive force.
in Peru’s democratization. The goal now, she suggested, should be to undertake the long-term process of constructing a democracy that represents all Peruvian peoples and that respects the cultural diversity of the country. Despite opposition from the existing political elite, Dr. Karp urged a strategy of empowerment and assistance that would allow the indigenous peoples to benefit from the natural resources extracted from the very land they inhabit. She mentioned the various improvements made during the current Peruvian administration and finished by emphasizing that, despite the difficulties involved, achieving a truly representative democracy must be the greatest priority of the Peruvian society.

During the dialogue with the audience that followed the First Lady’s presentation, one guest pointed out that, while there exist cultural, legal, and linguistic measures of indigenous status, one very visible measure is whether an individual appears to be phenotypically indigenous. He then asked whether discrimination based on this status was common and, if so, how one might deal with this issue. Dr. Karp responded with a personal story of discrimination against her husband and stated she believes that this discrimination will continue to be an unfortunate part of Peruvian culture until better economic distribution is achieved.

In response to a question about Brazil’s successful implementation of a negative income tax, Dr. Karp outlined the Peruvian government’s forthcoming endeavor to begin direct transfers to mothers, contingent only on matriculating their children in school and having vaccinated their children. To encourage the matriculation of indigenous children into the school system, the government has undertaken curriculum reform, with the aim of making it accessible to both indigenous and non-indigenous children. Additionally, Peru is training bilingual teachers to assist in this process of integration.

Dr. Karp agreed with another participant who decried the persistent efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to encourage high birth rates among the indigenous populations. In her answer she noted that, while Peru is by law a secular state, the state has difficulty competing with the tenacious efforts of the Church.

The final question pertained to coca production and its link to indigenous cultural identity. Dr. Karp stated that, as an anthropologist, she understands the role that coca plays in indigenous ritual life; therefore, she neither expects nor supports total eradication of the plant. As long as the market for coca derivates exists and there are no crops that offer farmers comparable incomes, she believes coca leaves will continue to play a large role in indigenous livelihoods.

Although there were many more questions, time did not allow all of the guests an opportunity to speak.

For the complete text of Dr. Karp’s speech, click here.

For more pictures of the event, click here.

This event was part of the Peru at GW program.