

The Peruvian government is sending a team of officials to a remote region of the Amazon jungle to investigate the deaths of 14 shamans who were killed in a string of brutal murders, skriver avisa the Guardian.

The traditional healers, all from the Shawi ethnic group, were murdered in separate incidents over the last 20 months, allegedly at the behest of a local mayor.

No arrests have been made over the deaths, which took place in and around Balsapuerto, a small river port in [Peru](#)'s vast Amazon region on its northern border with Ecuador, Colombia and Brazil.

The prime suspects, however, in the disappearance of one victim and the murder of another are the mayor of Balsapuerto, Alfredo Torres and his brother Augusto.

The two men were named in a report from the public prosecutor's office in the nearest town of Yurimaguas, which said seven of the victims had been shot, stabbed or hacked to death with machetes. Local people identified all of them as *curanderos* or native healers, said the vice-minister of intercultural affairs, Vicente Otta.

The Roman Catholic church in the area has reported the death of seven other shamans whose bodies have yet to be found, Otta said, adding that territorial disputes and political disagreements also pointed to the mayor being "one of the instigators of the slaughter".

He said that the murder suspects had sought to "legitimise the killings " by blaming the victims for the high level of infant mortality in the area.

Torres has denied the allegations in interviews with local media. Calls to his office went unanswered.

The public prosecutor's report also details the testimony of a survivor of one attack. Bautista Inuma was mistaken for a shaman and received gunshot wounds and had an arm hacked off before he managed to escape.

Roger Rumrill, an expert on Peruvian Amazon cultures and a government adviser, said some of the victims' bodies were thrown into rivers, to be devoured by piranhas and other fish.

He alleged that the mayor, who is an evangelical Christian, ordered the killings on hearing that the shamans planned to form an association. He said the mayor's brother was known in the area as a *matabrujos* or witch killer.

"For Protestant sects, the shamans are possessed by the devil; a totally sectarian, primitive and racist concept," he said.

Shamans in the Peruvian Amazon use [psychoactive plants such as the jungle vine ayahuasca](#) for spiritual ceremonies. As early as the 16th century, Spanish and Portuguese missionaries described its use by native people in the Amazon as the work of the devil.

"Until now the death of 14 *curanderos* who are the depositaries of Amazon knowledge wasn't worth the attention of the press," Rumrill said. "That's an expression of how fragmented and racist this country is. A centralised country which continues to look at its interior with total indifference."

The National Institute for the Development of Andean, Amazonian and Afro-Peruvian Peoples estimates that there are around 330,000 indigenous people in Peru's Amazon region, about 1% of the country's population of more than 29 million.

Gregor MacLennan, Peru programme coordinator for the NGO Amazon Watch, said: "The death of these shamans represents not just a tragic loss of life, but the loss of a huge body of knowledge about rainforest plants and the crucial role shamans play in traditional medicine and spiritual guidance in indigenous communities."