

3-27-2008

Guatemalan Campesinos Kidnap Belgian Tourists To Restart Land Talks; Government Bends

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Guatemalan Campesinos Kidnap Belgian Tourists To Restart Land Talks; Government Bends." (2008).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9592>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Guatemalan Campesinos Kidnap Belgian Tourists To Restart Land Talks; Government Bends

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2008-03-27

On March 14, a group of indigenous campesinos kidnapped four Belgian tourists, their local guide, and their boatman near Rio Dulce, about 250 km northeast of Guatemala City. The area is a tourist destination but also one of the many sites of the ongoing struggle about land ownership and indigenous rights in the country. The kidnappings gave the campesinos some talking points in their fight to wrest their lands from usurpers. And, it gave them some bargaining chips in their effort to secure the release of one of their imprisoned leaders.

The kidnapping and its aftermath were well-orchestrated; negotiations began almost at once for the release of the Belgians. Campesino leader Roberto Xol was soon on the phone with The Associated Press and told the reporter the hostages "are being well cared for. They have food, they're calm, and we've made them conscious of the struggle in Izabal department and why they're participating in this." Xol explained how the kidnappers used the river to evade police and then said, "A representative of the government communicated with us, and we're looking for dialogue to free the Belgian citizens." The reporter was even able to talk to a hostage. Eric Stosstris corroborated Xol. "We are OK. We have not been harmed. We're being kept in wooden huts, and we hope to be released soon." Stosstris, 62, identified his traveling companions as his wife Jenny, 59, and two friends, Gabriel and Mary Paul Van Huuse, 64 and 62, from Ghent, Belgium.

High on the campesinos' agenda for negotiations was the return of another of their leaders, Ramiro Choc, who was arrested Feb. 14 on charges of illegal land invasion, robbery, and holding people against their will. That last charge seems to capture the locals' core strategy in this latest flare-up in a very long-standing dispute. In February, this same group took 29 police hostage in Livingston, on the Caribbean coast. After a two-day standoff, the group released the police in exchange for an agreement on talks for legalizing their land claims and dropping Choc's charges. That presented a problem because "freeing Choc is something that is out of the hands of the executive branch, and that's why it would be difficult to fulfill that request," said Interior Ministry spokesman Ricardo Gatica.

Conflicting interests laid bare

But it soon became clear that, while difficult, an exchange could be arranged. Authorities were stuck with countervailing impulses that went beyond the legal dilemma of exchanging hostages for suspects legally detained by the state. There was the question of whether Choc and others were legally arrested and the moral issue of the state's failure to deal with the inequities that underlay the campesino action. At another level, the story of the kidnappings was making headlines from Belgium's De Standaard and Gazet Van Antwerpen to Al Jazeera's electronic version from Qatar. The practical effects were devastating for the area as hotels, usually packed with free-spending tourists for the Easter holidays, remained nearly empty.

Hoteliers and others rely on the season for a significant part of their annual income. From Rio Dulce to Puerto Barrios to Livingston, all reported immediate sharp drops in bookings. "We expected a group of 50 persons, but they cancelled. In past years the hotel was packed around Semana Santa, but now you can barely detect movement," said the receptionist at the Hotel del Norte in Puerto Barrios. There were many such statements. In Livingston, said an owner who did not even want his hotel mentioned, "The place looks like a cemetery." The spirit, not the letter, of the law On March 16, Human Rights Ombudsman Sergio Morales announced the Belgians had been released the night before, too late to improve the vacation outlook but not too late to start the polemical ball rolling by confirming there had been a prisoner exchange. Morales said the campesinos had modified their original demand and had asked that three people arrested in the hostage situation be handed over as well.

The three were captured during a confrontation between police and campesinos in the community of Puntarenas, on the shores of the Rio Dulce. The exchange occurred, but only after police launched a furious search operation that came up empty. All day on March 15, the day after the kidnapping, 80 officers, heavily armed and carrying ample supplies of tear-gas bombs, raided one tiny town after another in the area, searching homes, churches, schools, and any other edifice capable of hiding six people. But the kidnappers were too quick for the police. They, with the help of a sympathetic citizenry that had been involved in the police kidnapping, kept their captives on the move, just ahead of the searchers. The game might have gone on longer had it not been for one of the Belgians suffering heart problems because of a lack of medications.

This brought in the Procurador de los Derechos Humanos (PDH) and kicked off the subsequent negotiations leading to the liberation of the Belgians. Since their freeing entailed an eight-hour walk out of their hiding place, it is assumed that all went well with the heart problem. President Alvaro Colom ran his electoral campaign on a promise to redress the social ills that plague the country and undermine its justice system, and it is perhaps for that reason that Ronald Robles, head of the Secretaria de Comunicacion Social de la Presidencia, had to finesse the government's analysis of the events. Called upon to explain why no arrests were made in the matter, Robles said that taking the Belgians was a kidnapping, but the primary goal was their safe return, and, anyway, the responsibility for identifying and processing those responsible for the crime lay with the Ministerio Publico (MP), the attorney general's office. He said the executive is limited to continuing a dialogue with those who act within the law and to supporting the MP.

Local news agencies reported having tried to get a response from the MP's office, "but they didn't answer the calls." While Robles and Morales were finding ways to admit publicly that there had been an exchange, Vice Minister of Government Edgar Umana and the governor of Izabal department, Maribel Barrios, as well as the director of the Secretaria de Analisis Estrategico (SAE), Gustavo Solano, were all denying any knowledge of a prisoner exchange. They all insisted the successful return of the Belgians was the result of nothing more or less than the pressures exerted by security forces and the negotiations with the MP. The weight of the evidence favored the admitters over the deniers, however, because the PDH supplied the names of the exchanged alleged participants, Jose Xol Ba, Isabel Solis, and Victor Cruz, along with Ramiro Choc.

Further evidence of the violent nature of the confrontation at Puntarenas was the discovery of the body of Mynor Caal Golon, said to have been killed in the action. Morales said his requests for a vehicle to investigate the site where the body was found were ignored by officials from the government ministry. Days after the release of the hostages, police again flooded the zone. "Now there are police in all the communities. They are entering the houses. They say they are looking for people or arms, but they don't say what," said community leader Calixta Lopez. Police spokesman Ricardo Gatica responded, "The police presence is at the request of the whole tourism sector of the zone that wants tranquility for their business during the Semana Santa holiday."

An MP coordinator, Mario Falla, said his agency had conducted seven full-scale search operations, looking for the alleged perpetrators of the kidnapping. The ministry was apparently deeply offended by the way the kidnapping was resolved. "It is not good that this is about the state being brought to its knees through the exchange of people," he said. It is also not good, however, that, from the point of view of local residents, the state sets itself up as the victim in all this, although it never extended its authority into the area to deal with the property issues that touched off the recent events. Nor is it good, from the point of view of the PDH's Morales, that the killing of Caal bears the earmarks of an "extrajudicial execution." Morales has opened a probe into the matter.

Extrajudicial killings and wholesale raids of communities and villages do little more than remind those who least need reminding of the abuses of the war years. The PDH probe will look into reports that Caal was beaten and tortured prior to his death, but the investigation promises to be an uphill journey. Despite an autopsy reported to have been done, the police Oficina de Responsabilidad Profesional (ORP) had not, by March 25, determined whether a Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) tear-gas grenade had hit Caal in the chest and killed him or whether he had been murdered.

The air thick with intimidation, the major campesino group in the area the Comité de Unión Campesina (CUC) well-experienced in the excesses of security forces during the war years, said through spokesman Daniel Pascual that they had no part in what the locals did, either in the case of the 29 police or in taking the Belgians. "They don't belong to our organization," he said. "We were establishing links with them, but for solidarity. We believe that the way they have manifested their disagreement is not the right way, but, at the same time, we understand it is the only way that the government is going to pay attention to them, because dialogue in this country is already exhausted."

The Colom government, however, has taken these events as an opportunity to pump new life into the idea of settling long-standing issues with other-than-destructive methods and on March 19 announced it would open talks on the problems of land tenancy with the Alianza para el Desarrollo Rural, a group of campesino organizations. The announcement came along with a denial that the short time to startup of the talks had anything to do with the issues at Izabal, much less with Ramiro Choc and his land takeovers. But the context speaks for itself.

Izabal is home to 132 land conflicts (see NotiCen, 2006-10-05), of which 15 involve illegal occupation, five of them by Choc's organization, Encuentro Campesino. The talks will be under the authority of the Secretaria de Relaciones Interinstitucionales (SRI) and will go far beyond the Izabal cases to embrace more than 1,500 cases now open in the Secretaria de Asuntos Agraria (SAA). For the

purpose of these talks, 14 locations will be set up throughout the country. The plan calls not only for giving out land but also for assistance in starting productive activities on these lands. The plan picks up the issue where it was dropped, sometime in the 1990s when the war was winding down, refugees were returning to lands provided them under several different programs, and Alvaro Colom, as director of FONAPAZ, the national peace fund, was in charge of administering international aid for these very purposes.

On Colom's watch during the administrations of ex-Presidents Jorge Serrano (1991-1993) and Ramiro de Leon Carpio (1993-1996), more than 40,000 refugees were repatriated and resettled. Izabal department, a land-tenancy problem back then, is very much more so now, as mining companies, agribusiness, and tourism compete to displace indigenous communities and fling the campesino way of life on history's slagheap.

-- End --