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## **U.S. Implicates Colombian Rebels in Mysterious Kidnapping in Ecuador**

*by LADB Staff*

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Foreign investigators are in Ecuador to help search for eight Canadians, three Spaniards, and a US citizen kidnapped Sept. 11. The US government and some Colombian military officials have blamed Colombian guerrillas for the kidnapping. The guerrillas have denied responsibility and the Ecuadoran government has not dismissed other possibilities. "Some experts have arrived from the US, Spain, Belgium, and Canada while others are en route," said Ecuadoran Interior Minister Vladimiro Alvarez. "They are investigators who will work alongside our investigators. The help they provide will assist in freeing the hostages."

The Ecuadoran newspaper El Universo also reported that US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents are in Ecuador assisting in the search.

On Sept. 11, armed assailants in combat fatigues kidnapped one US citizen and seven Canadian oil workers, employees of Canada-based United Pipeline Systems, in the dense Amazon forest of northwestern Sucumbios province, 25 km from the Colombian border and 135 km east of Quito. They also seized one Canadian and three Spanish tourists and killed an Ecuadoran soldier assigned to protect the Canadians, who were installing a pipeline.

The kidnap victims have been identified as Spaniards Ander Mimenza, his sister Maria Jesus and her husband Jesus Maria Magunagoycochea; Leonard Carter from the US; and Canadians Barry Meyer, Steven Brent, Neil Barber, Colin Frazer, Rod Dumbar, Grand Ramkin, Brent Scheeler, and Sabine Roblain. Mimenza works in Ecuador for the Asociacion Latinoamericana de Educacion Radiofonica (ALER).

Officials said after capturing the oil workers, the kidnappers set up a roadblock. They stopped about 15 vehicles and took the Belgian-born Canadian tourist and the three Spaniards hostage. Several Ecuadorans also were held briefly but released.

One of the freed Ecuadorans said the kidnappers spoke with strong Colombian accents. More than 1,000 Ecuadoran police and military units have searched the rugged jungle in search of the captives. The police believe the kidnappers and their hostages are still in Ecuador.

The Ecuadoran government formed a crisis committee, which includes the ministers of human development, defense, and government. Police commander Gen. Jorge Vallarroel said the crisis committee evaluates the results of the search and investigation daily. "The priority is the lives of the hostages," said Vallarroel. He said it is still unclear whether the kidnappers are "subversives or delinquents." He said leaflets found in Sucumbios said the Colombian guerrilla group Fuerzas

Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) was not responsible for the kidnapping. "They have an agenda," Vallarroel said, "either political or for money, and we are waiting for them to communicate."

In the Ecuadoran Amazon, harassment of foreign oil workers by criminals has been reported, but the incidents have usually targeted individuals and have not been serious. But the head of the search operations, Flavio Cardenas, suggested the perpetrators could be common criminals. "They killed an Ecuadoran soldier," he said. "The FARC would not have done that, it would be more like delinquents."

Another possibility is that they are right-wing Colombian paramilitaries. Experts on the Colombian conflict said it is possible the paramilitaries staged the kidnapping to discredit their leftist rivals. Authorities have not ruled out the possibility that Carlos Castano, leader of the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), is behind the kidnapping. The Bogota daily El Tiempo reported that the AUC announced the creation of a paramilitary bloc in the area along the border with Ecuador.

And, in early September, Castano threatened Venezuela and Panama, saying their security forces provide support to the FARC along the borders with Colombia, and he would consider any parties acting as suppliers, liaisons, or accomplices to the rebels "military objectives." The threat was interpreted by analysts as an attempt to show that Colombia's conflict is being "internationalized."

Gen. Paco Moncayo, Ecuador's military chief during the brief border war with Peru in 1995, said the incident was a provocation designed to draw Ecuador into the Colombian conflict. He said if the FARC had committed the kidnapping, it would be a serious political error, since it could provide the excuse for direct intervention by Colombia's neighbors in its internal conflict.

Either Colombia's insurgents "declare one thing and do another, or this could be a provocation coming from elsewhere, to implicate the FARC or to pull us into the conflict with them," said Moncayo.

## *US blames Colombian guerrillas*

US officials see the kidnapping as new proof that Colombia's civil war is spilling into neighboring countries, threatening regional stability. US White House drug czar Barry McCaffrey warned on a recent trip to South America of concerns that the FARC might establish a base in Ecuador.

A senior State Department official who requested anonymity said the FARC was behind the abduction and this showed it was unwilling to negotiate peace in good faith with Colombia's government. "This is the group that said it was serious about negotiating peace," the official said. The Clinton administration is considering a major boost in military and economic aid to Colombia as part of an overall strategy to contain drug traffickers and armed violence. The US is providing almost US\$300 million in counternarcotics assistance to Colombia during the current fiscal year, making it one of the largest recipients of US aid worldwide.

## *FARC denies responsibility*

On Sept. 15, FARC commander Ivan Rios denied in a telephone interview that his group had anything to do with the kidnapping. "They are accusing the FARC of going back on its word, because we have clearly said that we are not going to engage in activities outside our own country," said Rios.

Two days later, the FARC again denied any role in the kidnapping in an email message addressed "to world opinion" and sent to ALER. "We have watched with patience and indignation at how perverse slander is being used by those interested in promoting the internationalization of the Colombian conflict to charge our organization with responsibility for seizing 12 foreigners in the sister Republic of Ecuador," the statement said. "We have repeatedly expressed our position of absolute respect for the territorial sovereignty of the people and government of Ecuador and of other countries bordering Colombia."

The statement went on to say that the effort to link it to the kidnapping was part of a plan backed by hard-liners in Washington including McCaffrey to set the stage for foreign intervention in Colombia's domestic conflict.

On Sept. 18, the Ecuadoran daily Hoy said it received a message from a FARC spokesperson saying the FARC was conducting its own investigation into the kidnapping and would soon make public its findings. Oil companies want protection After the kidnapping, fourteen oil companies demanded that Ecuador's military provide more protection for their workers. "We demand security measures that are sufficient to guarantee and ensure the execution of our contracts in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity," the Association of Petroleum Exploring and Exploiting Companies of Ecuador (ASOPEC) statement said. Ecuador produces 295,000 barrels per day of crude, of which 250,000 bpd are drawn by state-owned Petroecuador and the remaining 45,000 bpd by private companies. [Sources: Notimex, 09/15/99, 09/16/99; Inter Press Service, 09/16/99; Associated Press, 09/14-17/99; The New York Times, 09/19/99; Reuters, 09/14/99, 09/15/99, 09/17/99, 09/21/99; Spanish news service EFE, 09/13/99, 09/15-17/99, 09/22/99]

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