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Eight Foreign Hostages Released in Ecuador After 99 Days

by LADB Staff

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Eight foreigners, kidnapped in northern Ecuador near the Colombian border by an unidentified armed group Sept. 11, were released Dec. 19. They had walked 24 hours in the jungle before meeting two local residents who took them to a military base. They were in good condition despite their ordeal.

The government said that now that the captives have been released, the military will begin intensive operations to identify and find those responsible. "Now that the objective of finding the kidnap victims alive has been achieved, state intelligence units can pursue obtaining information to identify, find, and capture those who committed this act," said Government Minister Vladimiro Alvarez.

On Sept. 11, a large armed group captured the seven Canadians and one US citizen working for Canadian firm United Pipeline Systems, a subsidiary of City Investing. The attackers killed a soldier and also kidnapped four tourists three Spaniards and one Canadian who were later freed. Those just freed include US citizen Leonard Carter, 23, and Canadians Barry Meyer, 47, Steven Brent, 23, Neil Barber, 33, Colin Fraser, 30, Rod Dunbar, 34, Brent Scheeler, 22, and Grant Rankin, 39 (see NotiSur, 1999-09-24).

Canadians reportedly paid ransom On Dec. 14, Ecuadoran Defense Minister Jose Gallardo said the Canadian oil firm paid a ransom in September to free the kidnapped employees. "City paid a ransom to free its people, but we don't know the amount," Gallardo told reporters. An official at City's Quito office denied any knowledge about Gallardo's statement regarding the ransom. "We have no idea where the minister got this information," a City official who requested anonymity said.

In early December, local radio stations reported that City had paid US\$3.5 million. Canada's Ambassador to Ecuador John Kneale said that neither the Ecuadoran government nor the diplomatic corp had participated in the ransom negotiations. It is the largest single kidnapping involving Canadians in recent memory, and the worst to hit Ecuador's oil zone, where foreign companies have been pumping crude for more than three decades. Identity of captors is not known The identity of the kidnapers is still unknown. While no one has claimed responsibility, one theory considered by the government is that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) carried out the abductions.

The FARC denied on Sept. 17 that it was involved, saying the allegations by Colombian, Ecuadoran, and US authorities were "perverse slander." Another possibility is that the kidnapping was the work of another Colombian guerrilla group, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), which frequently attacks oil companies. One local press report said the army had intercepted conversations between ELN leaders regarding the kidnapping. Still another theory is that it was done by indigenous

activists who are battling increasing incursions into their land by foreign oil companies, which the Indians say is causing irreparable health and environmental damages.

Defense Minister Gallardo and Government Minister Alvarez say the kidnappers could be either guerrillas or common criminals. Col. Flavio Cardenas says he is sure that the kidnappers included Ecuadorans or that Ecuadorans were somehow aiding them. "You have to know the environment," he said. "And without people in the area helping them, it would be hard to succeed as well as they did."

Several times before the hostages were released, Cardenas said military search teams thought they had pinpointed a spot where the men were being held. Ground patrols would surround the location and helicopters would bring rescue squads to the scene. "On many occasions we were sure we had them," he said. But a month ago, Cardenas was told to back off. Negotiations between the oil company and the unidentified kidnappers were getting serious. No one wanted an army operation to jeopardize the victims' safe release. [Sources: Reuters, 12/14/99; CNN, 12/19/99; Spanish news service EFE, 12/19/99, 12/20/99; Notimex, 12/20/99; The Globe and Mail (Toronto), 12/16/99, 12/22/99; Hoy (Ecuador), 12/21/99, 12/22/99]

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