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## Hostage Release Talks Stall with ELN

by LADB Staff

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Among the numerous tragedies resulting from the decades-long Colombian conflict is the plight of hundreds of civilians who have been kidnapped by armed groups and held for months, and in some cases, years. Negotiations to free seven foreigners being held by the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) broke down just as success seemed assured.

Four Israelis, a German, a Spaniard, and two Britons were seized while visiting the archeological ruins at Ciudad Perdida in the northern Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. One Briton, teenager Matthew Scott, managed to escape by jumping from a high ravine during a forced march, and he has since been reunited with his family in Great Britain. The other hostages are Israelis Beni Daniel, Ortaz Ohayon, Ido Joseph Guy, and Erez Altawil; Spaniard Asier Huegun Etxeberria; Briton Mark Henderson; and German Reinhilt Weigel.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe reportedly offered to temporarily free ELN leader Francisco Galan from prison to help facilitate the hostages' safe release. The UN said it "took seriously" the ELN's announcement to free the hostages. "We have been informed of the ELN's proposal to free its seven foreign hostages starting next week" with its sole condition being the presence of the commission, a UN spokesperson told the press.

### *Church attempts to mediate release*

Luis Alberto Giraldo Jaramillo, archbishop of

Medellin, who was authorized to negotiate with the ELN by the Colombian government, said that the group planned to release the hostages one by one, starting with Huegun, a Spaniard from that country's Basque region. In mid-October, the ELN had announced that it would release Huegun alone, provided that politicians and media came from Spain, Galan was freed, and the Colombian military which had been searching for the hostages suspended operations in the area.

Uribe rejected the demands, and Huegun's release was called off. Archbishop Giraldo announced the proposed release after talks with Galan, who was being held in Itagui prison just outside the city of Medellin. The archbishop said the hostages would be handed over to a commission made up of priests from the Catholic Church, a representative of the UN, and two guerrilla commanders, Galan and Felipe Torres. Afterwards, Galan would return to prison.

Giraldo said the ELN's Comando Central decided to free the tourists as a "gesture for the future" of the country. "The ELN accepted the proposal of the church to free the foreigners in their power," he said. In exchange for freeing the hostages, Giraldo said that the government had agreed to send a humanitarian team to visit the Sierra Nevada area, 1,000 km from Bogota, where the hostages were taken, to look into the plight of impoverished people who live there.

In a communique issued two weeks after the tourists were kidnapped, the ELN said it had seized them to raise awareness of what it claimed was the suffering of the mainly Indian inhabitants of the region. It blamed their desperate situation on the actions of right-wing paramilitary groups and the Colombian army.

## *Deal falls through*

But on Oct. 30, church mediators said that government negotiators and ELN rebels could not agree on how the foreign tourists would be released. Archbishop Giraldo said that the stumbling block was the rebels' refusal to release all the hostages at once.

On Nov. 1, the government specifically rejected the ELN proposal to release the prisoners one by one. Government peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said the government would only accept the release of all the hostages at the same time. The impasse has stalled prospects for a release of the tourists anytime soon. "We don't see another option other than that the kidnapped tourists be turned over in one operation, and we hope that the ELN will respond to the national and international outcry," said Restrepo on Radio Cadena Nacional(RCN). He said the Uribe government had offered to arrange for a humanitarian commission to receive the hostages and was just waiting for the ELN to proceed.

When the release still seemed on track, Jaime Bernal, a member of the Comision de Paz de Colombia, said he considered that the contacts between the government and the rebels in the effort to free the tourists were a way to lay a foundation for a more extensive peace process. Bernal told reporters that the two sides had been maintaining contact and that the necessary space had been opened to advance a formal dialogue that could bring a negotiation for peace. He said the authorization by the Uribe government for Galan to leave prison and act as a guarantor for the turnover of the hostages was a positive sign.

"It seems to me that the posture of the government, when it offered that not only Galan but also Felipe Torres could be intermediaries of this process, showed that contacts exist, which seems fortunate," said Bernal.

The ELN, the second-largest guerrilla group in Colombia, has consistently discounted any possibility of dialogue with the Uribe government as long as it maintains "its militaristic policy" for ending the 40-year conflict. With this collapse of the effort to free the foreign tourists, the hope for more extensive talks has dimmed once more. Colombia is the kidnapping capital of the world.

The Fundacion Pais Libre said that 3,000 people were kidnapped in Colombia in 2002, 80% of them in actions attributed to the rebel groups and the rest to common criminals.

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