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ELN Releases Kidnapped Tourists

by LADB Staff

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Just before Christmas, the Colombian guerrilla group Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) released the five tourists it had kidnapped Sept. 12 (see NotiSur, 2003-11-07). As a condition for the release, a humanitarian commission traveled to the remote Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta area to examine conditions of people there.

Their report, released in mid-December, painted a grim picture of the suffering of the Indians and campesinos who live in the Sierra Nevada. Colombia has the world's highest kidnapping rate, with some 3,000 abductions a year. Most are carried out by the two guerrilla groups the ELN and the larger Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

The ELN released the tourists on Dec. 22. "The five foreigners have been freed," said Jaime Bernal Cuellar, a former Colombian prosecutor and member of the humanitarian group that mediated the release. The breakthrough in efforts to arrange the release came the week before when the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe pulled the military search and rescue mission back from the area to allow the humanitarian commission to go in.

The British and Israeli governments had pressured the Uribe government to avoid a combat-style rescue raid that might endanger the lives of the hostages.

The ELN had announced the impending release on Dec. 15, saying they would free the hostages because Colombian military operations in the area had increased the possibility of their being accidentally killed or wounded. "As proof of our flexibility and maturity, we promise to liberate the hostages in the upcoming days, hopefully before the end of the year, to avoid such a tragedy," said the statement by the group.

More than 2,000 Colombian troops had been combing the mountainous area in search of the tourists Israelis Beni Daniel, Ortaz Ohayon, Ido Joseph Guy, and Erez Altawil, and British citizen Mark Henderson. They had been visiting the archaeological ruin Ciudad Perdida when they were captured. Another hostage, 19-year-old Briton Matthew Scott, escaped the day after they were captured and was rescued. Spaniard Asier Huegun Exteberria and German Reinhilt Weigel were freed on Nov. 24.

In exchange for their release, the ELN had demanded that the Catholic Church and the Defensoria del Pueblo visit the area and prepare a report on the conditions of the native peoples in the Sierra Nevada. The ELN claimed it carried out the abductions to draw attention to the suffering inflicted on the Indians, allegedly by the military and right-wing paramilitary fighters.

The ELN said the Dec. 23 release was a good will gesture in support of the efforts by the Catholic Church and the Defensoria del Pueblo to respond to the humanitarian crisis in the area.

Tourists taken back to Bogota before going home

On Dec. 22, two helicopters carrying the humanitarian commission landed at a secret location in the Sierra Nevada mountains some 950 km north of Bogota, where the hostages and the armed and masked rebels were waiting. The ELN local commander wished the tourists a merry Christmas and apologized for having kidnapped them. The helicopters then took off and landed at the airport in Valledupar, where some of the captives' relatives were waiting.

The group had walked for three days to get to the rendezvous point for the handover, said Bishop Hector Fabio Henao, a member of the humanitarian commission. He said the release showed negotiating with the rebels can bear fruit, adding, "This gesture gives us Colombians great hope."

"I would like to thank everyone who made our release possible," Altawil said, giving special thanks to the Catholic Church. He said the hostages had never felt their lives were in danger, and they were generally treated well by their captors, although at times they were treated "less than well."

After 101 days as a hostage, Ido Yosef Guy said his worst day was when he and the three other Israelis dug a hole in the mud hut where they slept and escaped at dawn. They left most of their belongings in their beds to look like sleeping bodies. Their freedom, however, was short-lived. "The rebels realized we were gone within an hour, and they captured us, again," said Guy. "We really should have done a better job on the beds." He spoke at the Bogota residence of the Israeli ambassador, where he participated in a menorah-lighting ceremony to celebrate Hanukkah.

Humanitarian commission finds terrible conditions

To secure the captives' release, the commission, which had declared itself "autonomous," traveled to the Sierra Nevada mountains in late November, with UN representatives, and visited six locations and talked to local residents. The commission reported that some 200,000 indigenous people and campesinos remain captives of the civil war in the area.

It released its report the week before the tourists were released and presented it to Uribe and ELN spokesman Francisco Galan, who is in the Itagui maximum-security prison. The report was presented by Bishop Henao, director of the Pastoral Social of the Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia (CEC), Defensor del Pueblo Volmar Perez, and Dario Echeverry, a priest who is secretary of the Catholic Church's Comision de Conciliacion Nacional (CCN).

The commission said it heard reports of "extrajudicial executions, death threats, disappearances, torture, attacks on the civilian population and their property, widespread forced displacement, the occupation of victims' farms," as well as "the pillaging of the cattle and household goods of local residents, recruitment of minors, and the use of antipersonnel mines." It found "a critical humanitarian situation" and "the lack of a real and effective state presence." In the area are about 160,000 campesinos, as well as four indigenous communities the Arhuacos, Arzarios, Kankuamos, and Koguis who number around 50,000.

In the past year, "human rights violations and infractions of international humanitarian law have increased to such an extent that the indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada are facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the country," said the report. The commission said, "humanitarian assistance and a lifting of the blockades is urgently needed for these families to survive with a minimum of food security and basic supplies, even in the midst of the armed conflict."

The report described the Sierra Nevada as a "strategic" spot in the civil war, because its proximity to the sea facilitates the smuggling of "arms and munitions, as well as drugs." The area, where the guerrillas have been active since the 1980s, has seen a paramilitary offensive and an increasing army presence in the past two years, said the commission. The paramilitaries "are advancing toward the highest mountainous areas, traditionally controlled by the guerrillas."

The right-wing paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), which has close links with the military, began to enter the area a decade ago. The report said it acted "in reprisal against social mobilization and activism by campesinos and trade unionists." The AUC's territorial expansion "involves an interest in expanding coca crops and pressuring the campesinos to grow coca; otherwise they are the object of displacement or forced displacement."

The commission said the defenseless local population faced an ever-present risk that the paramilitaries or guerrillas would deem them sympathizers or supporters of the other side and take reprisals. The complaint most often mentioned in the report was that the military and paramilitaries work together.

Paramilitaries "have well-known camps and a regular presence in the villages, and they launch systematic attacks on the populace while the security forces take no real and effective action against them; on the contrary, testimony from a range of sources refers to the collaboration between them," said the report.

The result is an area of ghost towns, empty villages, abandoned farms, vacant homes, and closed-down businesses. "Everything has been pillaged and plundered by the groups that attacked the populace," said the report. The paramilitaries charge fees to allow residents to take their farm products to market, and they steal part of the campesinos' goods and destroy anything they consider useful to the guerrillas.

The worst human rights violations are the numerous selective murders or mass killings, "perpetrated especially by the AUC," the report underlines. In the massacres, the paramilitaries "select their victims from a large group of local residents who have been rounded up, and then murder them individually or in small groups, and scatter the corpses." The individual selective murders involve "the extrajudicial execution of victims whose names appear on lists" that have been previously drawn up, says the report.

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