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FARC Hostage Exchange Canceled

by LADB Staff
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The government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez has announced that it will consider negotiations to trade jailed rebels in exchange for hostages, a major change from the president's previous refusal to negotiate with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

The prospects for a "humanitarian exchange" of imprisoned FARC members for military and civilian hostages had been moribund, but Uribe announced in late August his willingness to consider an exchange with the country's main rebel force. The terms that each side is willing to accept, however, have held up any exchange, with the government requiring the exile or social reinsertion of released rebels while the FARC demands full freedom for its members.

Proposal and counterproposal unacceptable to each side

The FARC is willing to swap more than 50 hostages, some of whom have been held for as long as seven years, for between 300 and 400 imprisoned rebels. Some 60 civilian hostages are available for a possible exchange, as well as around 24 political hostages. Among the captives are a former minister and an ex-governor, four parliamentary officials, 12 regional deputies, three US defense contractors, and more than 40 soldiers and police. Other kidnapping victims, who according to government figures total 800, are not eligible for potential exchange since the FARC is holding them for ransom.

On Aug. 18, the government made an apparent about-face on its refusal to "negotiate with the terrorists" and announced it would be willing to release 50 insurgents "indicted or convicted" only for "rebellion" in exchange for "individuals kidnapped for political motives and members of the public forces held by the FARC." But the FARC responded by saying the government's proposal was not serious nor could it be taken seriously.

Human rights activists say that those convicted only on charges of rebellion are often trade unionists. Captured guerrillas usually face other criminal charges like kidnapping and murder, which means they would not be eligible for exchange under the conditions the government has set. The government also wants to send the released hostages into exile in Switzerland or France or else place them in a government program aimed at reinserting former guerillas and paramilitaries into society. After the FARC rejection of the proposal, government officials said in various media appearances that the door to dialogue was still open.

US Ambassador to Colombia William Wood rejected a FARC exchange proposal that would allow rebels to return to their ranks if freed. "They want their fellow criminals in jail returned to them so they can commit terrorism," said Wood. Swap would be Uribe's first negotiation with FARC Before the Aug. 18 proposal, the government had been demanding an end to ransom kidnappings and a unilateral cease-fire by the insurgents before it would discuss any possible humanitarian exchange.
Negotiations with the FARC have not taken place under the Uribe administration, although Mexico has been brokering discussions between the Colombian government and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), Colombia's second-largest rebel force (see NotiSur, 2004-06-25). Politicians and family members of kidnap victims called on the government to name negotiators to work on the exchange, but the Uribe administration refused.

High Commissioner for Peace Luis Carlos Restrepo said that Switzerland was appointed as facilitator for the humanitarian exchange and that the Internet would be a faster method for communication anyway. Restrepo also said he was the only one the president had authorized to engage in negotiations with the rebels. The administration of former President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002) reached humanitarian accords with the FARC and ELN that led to the release of 81 police and soldiers, three intelligence agents, and 200 civilian hostages the guerrillas had held. In exchange, the government released 14 FARC insurgents from prison. The FARC also unilaterally freed 70 soldiers in 1997 and 350 in 2001.

The government and hostage family members accuse the FARC of using hostages as human shields during firefights. In May 2003, the FARC shot ten hostages it had been holding in a "mobile jail" when the Army surrounded them in a failed rescue attempt. The dead were eight soldiers and two top regional officials.

On Aug. 20, army troops killed three FARC fighters in an operation to rescue seven mountaineers in a central mountain range in the rural area of Anzoategui in the department of Tolima. The Army news agency, Agencia de Noticias del Ejercito, said the army troops fought rebels "to prevent the terrorists from approaching" the seven mountain climbers.

Complaints from US hostage relatives precede policy change

High-profile complaints by relatives of US military contractors held by the FARC made international headlines in the run-up to Uribe's change of policy. The Associated Press reported on the frustration of the mother of one of the US Defense Department contractors captured 18 months ago.

Jo Rosano of Bristol, Connecticut, said she was "sick and tired" of US government officials telling her they were doing everything possible to get her son freed. "What are they doing? What is the progress? Anything?" asked Rosano, mother of Marc Gonsalves, an employee of California Microwave Systems, a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman. "I believe the United States is just lying, pacifying me by saying 'we are doing what we can.'" Gonsalves, three other US citizens, and a Colombian army sergeant were on an anti-narcotics mission for Northrop Grumman when their single-engine plane developed engine trouble and crashed in the southern jungles controlled by the FARC.

The FARC later said it killed two men US citizen Thomas Janis and a Colombian sergeant while Gonsalves, Keith Stansell, and Thomas Howes were taken hostage. The FARC accuses the three of being CIA agents and has included them on a list of dozens of exchangeable prisoners. Rosano protested on the Plaza de Bolivar in Bogota with other kidnap-victim family members, saying she
would stay in Colombia until her son was released. She said she hoped to meet with Uribe, US Embassy officials, and the families of hundreds of Colombian hostages in rebel hands.

The widow of Tommy Schmidt, whose plane crashed when he was trying to locate the downed pilots in the weeks following their crash, also joined Rosano in Bogota. Fifty-four-year-old Sharon Schmidt said her husband crashed five times during his time in Vietnam, and his friends always rescued him. In Colombia, she said, he died trying to rescue his friends and, since he didn't accomplish it, she would take on the work that was sacred to him to the degree she was able.

The family of former independent presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt had repeatedly pressed Uribe to allow negotiations, but the president took a hard-line stance toward opening talks. As Betancourt campaigned in 2002, FARC rebels took the former senator captive and she has not been free since (see NotiSur, 2002-03-01).

In an interview with Chilean newspaper El Mercurio, Betancourt's husband, Juan Carlos Lecompte, called Uribe's offer to the rebels "ridiculous." He said the offer was "difficult for the guerrillas to accept, because it says to them 'we'll make a humanitarian exchange, but I'm going to release the prisoners who have committed almost no crime.' The big fish of the guerrillas, the ones in prison condemned for extortion, kidnapping, terrorism, and narcotrafficking might not be included on the list of exchangeable persons."

Opposition Sen. Antonio Navarro Wolff of the Polo Democratico Independiente (PDI) complained that Uribe was using the exchange as a tool for re-election. "The proposal is tied to the fact that the Congress is approving the project [to change the Constitution] that opens the way for a second term for Uribe Velez and the president is not thinking as an executive but as a candidate," said the senator. Uribe and his supporters are pushing to change the Constitution to allow the president to seek a second term (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13). More than 60% of Colombians would support a humanitarian exchange. [  

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