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Colombian Government Releases FARC Leader; Uribe Seeks Hostage Swap

by LADB Staff
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The government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has indicated that it would consider trading guerrilla prisoners for hostages, a change in policy for an administration that has previously rejected proposals for a "humanitarian exchange" of captives. In June, the government released Rodrigo Granda, a leading member of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), who was captured in Venezuela in 2004 (see NotiSur, 2005-01-28 and 2005-02-18).

Granda, known as the FARC's foreign minister, traveled to Cuba on June 18, and government officials hoped the release would advance efforts to gain the release of 60 hostages, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. In what he called a gesture of good faith to advance an agreement, Uribe also promised to free about 150 other prisoners whom he identified as rebels.

Hard-liner Uribe had previously expressed willingness to make an exchange with the country's largest rebel group (see NotiSur, 2004-09-03), but little progress had been made in talks. Uribe had recently vowed to only use military rescues, something that family members of kidnapped people and some escaped kidnap victims oppose because of the danger to the lives of the hostages (see NotiSur, 2006-10-27).

In May, Uribe back-pedaled on his insistence on a military solution, ordering the government to find a legal way to release the prisoners. He said the release of any prisoners would depend on the crimes they committed. Critics of the plan say rebels and paramilitary members might escape justice. Uribe opponents have also alleged that the president has only softened his position on a swap because of the political pressure on him after a long-running scandal linking members of his government and his top allies to paramilitary death squads responsible for the majority of the atrocities in the country's ongoing conflict (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02, 2007-05-04 and 2007-05-18).

French president solicits release of FARC diplomat

Granda, who had served as a roving diplomat for the FARC, said he was going to Cuba for medical exams and rest after more than two years in jail. A peace facilitator for the Roman Catholic Church, Dario Echeverry, accompanied Granda. He told Caracol Radio that he hoped Granda could "construct a space for himself that would allow him to work for peace and reconciliation in Colombia," but he did not say how or whether the rebel leader might contact insurgent representatives while on the island.

Uribe released Granda from prison on June 4 at the request of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who hoped the action would encourage the FARC to free Betancourt, a dual French-Colombian citizen. France has urged a negotiated solution, including a prisoner exchange. Interior Minister Carlos Holguin said on July 17 that he hoped Granda would use his time in Cuba to facilitate a
humanitarian exchange with the rebels, but cautioned that hostages' relatives would have to wait for any results.

Granda has tried to dampen expectations of any imminent deal. He said that he had not had any contact with the FARC while staying at the Bogota headquarters of the Catholic Church and that any mediating role he played would have to be ordered by the rebel group’s secretariat. Granda has reiterated long-standing FARC demands that any hostage deal must include the demilitarization of an 800-sq km zone in southwest Colombia for 45 days, as well as the release of two rebels held in US jails.

**FARC wants all of its prisoners released**

Uribe has rejected the proposal for a rebel safe haven. The FARC seems to take Uribe's unilateral decision to release prisoners as insignificant. Granda said the rebels would not consider piecemeal negotiations or prisoner swaps for the hostages, who include three US military contractors.

Guerrillas say the hostages they have must be swapped for all the guerrillas held in US and Colombian jails, about 500 in all. "If the (Americans) want an agreement, then they must send back those rebels in prison in the US," Granda said in an interview with the Associated Press. "I understand the US government did similar swaps in return for captured Americans during the Cold War, so I don't see why they can't do it in this case." US contractors Marc Gonsalves, Keith Stansell, and Thomas Howes were kidnapped in 2003 when their plane went down in southern Colombia as they were carrying out an intelligence-gathering mission (see NotiSur, 2003-02-28 and 2003-04-11).

The FARC calls them prisoners of war and accuses them of spying for the CIA. FARC rebels imprisoned in the US include guerrilla commander Nayibe "Sonia" Rojas, convicted earlier this year in a US court of exporting cocaine. Another commander, Ricardo Palmera better known by the nom de guerre Simon Trinidad is awaiting trial on charges of kidnapping the three contractors and drug trafficking.

The US has so far ruled out releasing the two imprisoned guerrillas. While both private contractors and the US military are helping search for the abducted Americans, the US has limited its statements on the three to saying that their welfare is the responsibility of the FARC.

The 58-year-old Granda dismissed speculation that the FARC may agree to separate negotiations: one for exchanging the US-held guerrillas for the contractors, and another with the Colombian government to free the remaining hostages. "At the moment, there's only one deal," he said on June 16, while still under heavy security in Colombia. Granda said that, while in prison, he refused to talk to a representative from the US Embassy who visited him in what he believes was an attempt to gather information on the kidnapped Americans.

"To just turn up at my cell and not request a meeting was an affront," Granda said. There had been hopes that the FARC would view the move positively and perhaps even respond by releasing some of their hostages. Granda said, however, that the FARC believed Uribe's actions in promising to release 150 FARC members were designed to weaken them, as the government insisted that all those who applied for early release leave the organization. He added that among those prisoners
scheduled for release are common criminals and innocent civilians falsely accused of belonging to the FARC.

Granda also explained why the FARC continues to kidnap, helping keep Colombia at the top of the world's abduction tables. "War is expensive, the oligarchs have the money, and we need to raise money," he said. Bogota mayor Luis Eduardo Garzon launched a campaign in June calling for a humanitarian exchange, seeking to pressure rebels and the government to push the process forward. Betancourt's ex-husband demands proof she's alive Fabrice Delloye, Betancourt's ex-husband, has expressed doubts about whether she is still alive and demanded on June 14 that the FARC provide proof that she and the other hostages are alive.

Delloye, a French diplomat who was married to the politician for a decade, also questioned whether a policeman who escaped after more than eight years of captivity by the FARC was ever held with Betancourt. Betancourt was campaigning in Colombia's southern rebel stronghold in 2002 when she was kidnapped along with her campaign manager Clara Rojas (see NotiSur, 2002-03-01).

The last proof of their being alive that their families received was a video handed over by the FARC more than four years ago. "We have to have faith, but how can we continue doing so if we don't have proof they are alive?" said Delloye in a phone interview with Caracol radio.

The most recent news of the FARC hostages including the three US military contractors emerged in May when policeman Jhon Frank Pinchao said he escaped from a jungle encampment in southeast Colombia. Delloye questioned Pinchao's account that he had been held for more than three years with Betancourt. "Pinchao could only say that she was still alive and exercising every day, but nothing more," he said. "Pinchao also said that Ingrid had given him French lessons, but he can only speak two or three words of French."

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