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Colombian Peace Talks Derailed After Death of Legislators Held Hostages

by LADB Staff
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Eleven of twelve Colombian politicians being held hostage by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) died in combat in June, dimming hopes that the government of President Alvaro Uribe and the rebel group would hold talks for releasing the dozens of remaining hostages it holds.

The FARC claimed that the politicians died in the crossfire during fighting with a military group, while Colombia's intelligence chief claimed to have evidence that the FARC murdered the lawmakers when two rebel factions accidentally began fighting each other. The government appeared even less likely to meet with guerrillas after a series of bombings and the politicians' deaths.

Nonetheless, the father of a FARC hostage made international headlines in June as he conducted a protest march of hundreds of kilometers, ultimately forcing Uribe to meet with him and calling for negotiations for a "humanitarian swap" of hostages for FARC prisoners. Uribe had made some indications that he would consider a hostage swap in June when he ordered the release of FARC leader Rodrigo Granda and said he was planning the release of 150 prisoners he said were FARC members (see NotiSur, 2007-06-29).

The FARC says it will kill any hostages in the event that the military attempts to rescue them by force. This policy and the potential for carnage and chaos in military rescues has generally led families members and advocates of hostages to oppose that option, preferring instead that Uribe open serious negotiations with the rebel force.

The leftist FARC is holding around 60 prominent hostages, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three US defense contractors. The rebels want all imprisoned rebels freed, including two held in the US, one of whom has already been convicted of drug trafficking.

This year, two hostages have escaped FARC captivity, including the foreign minister and a police officer who spent nearly nine years in rebel hands.

FARC, government give different accounts

On June 28, Uribe accused Colombian rebels of killing 11 kidnapped state lawmakers from Valle del Cauca in cold blood after the guerrillas issued a statement saying the hostages died in the crossfire during a military attack. The 12 were kidnapped in a brazen daylight raid in April 2002 in the southwest city of Cali.
In a live televised address to the nation, just hours after the statement by the FARC, Uribe said a military rescue operation was never authorized. Uribe also said no military operations took place on June 18, the date the FARC said the attack occurred, in zones where the hostages were thought to have been held. "The FARC wants to blame these deaths on the armed forces," said Uribe. "The FARC wants to hide this crime against humanity that it committed."

The Web site of the left-wing news agency ANNCOL carried a statement purportedly from the western command of the FARC. It said 11 of the 12 former provincial deputies were killed in the crossfire after an "unidentified military group" attacked the rebel camp June 18. "We are waiting for confirmation," said a crying Fabiola Perdomo, wife of one of those reported dead, in a telephone interview with the Associated Press. "I'm totally lost; we don't know what we're going to do."

The statement said that just one survived, Sigifredo Lopez, who was not with the others at the time of the attack. "To the families of the dead deputies, we offer our deepest condolences. We will do all in our power to help them recover the remains as soon as possible," the statement said.

The report did not say where the clash occurred, saying only that there had been increased operations by the military in the zone in recent weeks. The head of Colombia's armed forces Gen. Freddy Padilla said in a statement that "military intelligence has not had any information on where the deputies [of the province] of Valle del Cauca were being held by the FARC and so has not ordered any rescue missions."

As Uribe's government has put the FARC on the defensive, the group has limited its contacts with most news organizations, but it frequently uses ANNCOL to divulge information through statements and interviews. In May 2003, an attempted military rescue ended in bloodshed. FARC rebels hearing the approaching helicopters executed 10 hostages, including a former defense minister and an ex-governor (see NotiSur, 2003-05-09).

In April of this year, the FARC sent the deputies' families a "proof of life," a video of the kidnapped pleading for an agreement to set them free alongside messages for their families. The head of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) Andres Penate said on July 29 that intercepted communications showed the FARC had shot dead the hostages after coming across another rebel unit. Thinking they were security forces, commanders ordered the hostages to be killed rather than let them be rescued, claimed Penate.

The security chief also denied there had been any military operations in the area, saying informers and communication intercepts proved the FARC were responsible for the deaths. Penate said evidence showed the commander of the 60th Front, known as El Grillo (Cricket), ordered the politicians shot dead after his fighters clashed with the 29th Front. "They're trying to deceive the public, pretending that the hostages were located in the proposed safe haven so that they can blame the government for their deaths," he said. "Fools! Assassins! Liars! Now they want to consummate the lie."

Penate presented the transcript of a radio conversation, in which an unidentified FARC rebel reportedly asks about the sole hostage who was not killed in the incident. The rebels then
"tampered with the scene of the crime" and attempted to move the bodies before they are handed over, Penate told reporters. Even the disposition of the corpses was disputed by the government and the rebels.

FARC spokesperson Raul Reyes said in an interview distributed on July 18 that government actions were preventing the return of the bodies of the killed legislators. "Our desire is to deliver the cadavers of the deputies as soon as possible and at the same time explain the tragic consequences of Uribe's obstinate policy of rescuing the prisoners by force," said Reyes. On July 15, Uribe called the FARC "blackmailers with life and death," referring to the delay in returning the bodies.

Hostage's father marches to Bogota, meets with Uribe

The claims and counterclaims regarding the dead deputies of Valle del Cauca came as different civil groups sought to pressure the Uribe government to go to the negotiating table. Bogota's mayor joined families of kidnap victims and about 300 school children June 26 in a demonstration meant to increase pressure on the government to swap imprisoned rebels for guerrilla-held hostages.

The protest was "for the victims to pressure and hassle all they can and make those who have the power finally do something for this prisoner-swap," mayor Luis Eduardo Garzon said. But with every new bomb, the prospects for a swap seemed to fade away.

Authorities blamed rebels for a series of bombings that killed three and injured 30 during the prior weekend in the Pacific coast city of Buenaventura, calling it retaliation for the Navy's recent killing of a rebel commander. The rebels had yet to comment on the attacks, but Uribe ruled out a demilitarized zone in southwest Colombia, which has been a key rebel condition for any prisoner swap. "Terrorism will use the zone to mistreat the population and terrorists will use it as a refuge," said Uribe.

Meanwhile, the rebels have said there's no reason to stop fighting absent a government cease-fire. And in heavy combat in recent days, the Army said late on June 25 that it killed 11 more rebels. A 55-year-old teacher whose soldier son was kidnapped in a rebel attack a decade ago neared the capital June 31 after walking across half of Colombia to rally support for a prisoner swap.

Gustavo Moncayo has become a fixture on the national news since setting out on his cross-country crusade six weeks earlier with chains draped symbolically over his shoulders, enduring persistent foot problems and the blistering sun. "I decided to walk because I'm tired of the government's lies....The government and the politicians have done nothing for the kidnapped," said Moncayo as he walked through the town of Subia, just west of the capital, greeted by several hundred well-wishers.

Moncayo mortgaged his house and took out thousands of dollars in loans to underwrite the trek that began in his hometown of Sandona in Colombia's southwestern hills. He walked for more than 2250 km and 46 days by the time he reached Bogota's main plaza on Aug. 1. He vowed to camp in the plaza, in plain view of the Congress, until he got the government to agree to exchange imprisoned rebels for his son and 45 high-value hostages held by the FARC. Moncayo's son, Pablo Emilio, was 19 when he was captured in a 1997 FARC attack on a mountaintop Army communications post.
Seventeen other soldiers were taken by the rebels, and 10 were killed in the attack. Colombia has one of the world's highest kidnapping rates.

The Pais Libre Foundation, which helps families afflicted by abductions, estimates more than 3,000 people are in captivity in this Andean nation. Moncayo was mobbed by well-wishers in every hamlet he passed through. Along the way, he collected more than 2 million signatures in support of talks to free the hostages. Uribe yielded to pressure and met with Moncayo on Aug. 2, although the results of the meeting did not please the pilgrim.

"The president comes out here in public and says that we are going to be finished with these bandits and we'll eliminate these delinquents," said Moncayo after the meeting. "It's like stabbing us in the heart, the heart of the family members, it's like dying to us. I decided to take the initiative and come here to protest with my chains. These chains are for the president because he is not the owner of life, to say go and rescue them. The president is not the god of life and it hurts me, it hurts me." The "walker for peace" continued to push FARC representatives and the government to meet in the first weeks of August, asking Uribe for another personal meeting.

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