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Venezuelan President Chavez Offers to Mediate Peace Talks in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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The effort to overcome the ongoing impasse between the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) regarding the fate of dozens of hostages in the hands of the FARC has a new participant, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Chavez has formally offered to mediate between the government and the guerrillas, releasing more than two dozen Colombian prisoners as a goodwill gesture to get talks going. Chavez new role became public just as the Red Cross recovered all 11 bodies of regional legislators from the state of Valle del Cauca who were killed while in FARC captivity (see NotiSur, 2007-08-10).

Will the Chavez cachet sway the FARC?

By directly offering to mediate between the two parties, Chavez faces a difficult situation marked most significantly by its intractable nature. The Uribe government opposes many conditions the FARC requires for talks, like the demilitarization of the highlands around the area of Pradera in southern Colombia. Uribe refuses demilitarization, saying prior experience showed that the rebels used demilitarized areas to build their strength and launch more attacks.

But Chavez reportedly enjoys some cachet among Colombia's oldest and largest guerrilla force. Colombia's Foreign Relations Minister Fernando Araujo, who spent the past six years held captive by the FARC (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02), has claimed that the rebel group holds Chavez as the new model to emulate as a leftist army. "The guerrillas of the FARC that I met see in Venezuela's President Chavez their ideological leader," said Araujo. "They are constantly studying Chavez's biography, they watch documentaries about Chavez on television, there is a sense of excitement among guerrillas when they hear Chavez speaking on the radio."

Chavez acknowledged stepping into a difficult role, but said he hopes to eventually "move toward a peace accord in Colombia." "If I have to go to the gates of hell to try for a humanitarian accord [the common phrase for a prisoner exchange] and beyond that a peace accord in the beloved neighbor nation of Colombia well, I will go there with your approval," Chavez told supporters during a speech in Caracas.

Among those being held by the rebels are former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, a French-Colombian citizen, and three US defense contractors. The latest sticking point in discussions is the FARC demand for a 45-day demilitarization of an 800 sq km zone in southwestern Colombia.

The group says it needs the municipalities of Florida and Pradera cleared of troops to ensure the safety of the hostages and its fighters during the handover. Uribe has refused any territorial
concessions, saying the last time Colombia provided a demilitarized zone, leftist guerrillas gained strength and built airstrips to ship cocaine. "We will keep asking for the demilitarization of Pradera and Florida, and we will ask that President Chavez, given his political weight, help achieve this demilitarized zone," FARC spokesman Raul Reyes told the Argentine newspaper Clarin.

Another FARC demand is that the exchange include two rebels now serving US prison terms. They would have to be pardoned by US President George W. Bush for that to happen. Less discussed is what to do with freed guerrillas. The FARC insists they be allowed to return to their 43-year-old insurgency.

Uribe's government insists they must live outside Colombia or promise not to return to crime or rebellion. "I am optimistic that Chavez will advance this process, with the respect he has within the rebels and across Latin America," said Yolanda Pulecio, the mother of Betancourt, who recently marked her 2000th day in captivity.

Chavez called on both sides to be flexible, urging Uribe and FARC commander Manuel Marulanda Velez, known as Tirofijo, to "facilitate our work." He said he hopes that "each signal may be one more step in freeing up the game and that we don't close ourselves off in stances that have already led many other attempts at facilitation to fail."

Colombia's Interior Minister Carlos Holguín expressed pessimism on Aug. 31, saying the process would be difficult. "We have to see what alternatives or initiatives [Chavez] presents," Holguín said in an interview at his office in Bogota. "Each meeting between Chavez and President Uribe is constructive in general, so this will be, too, but on this issue, I see it as very difficult."

Holguín, 66, said he believes the FARC has no intention of freeing the hostages since it has rejected Uribe's every effort to show flexibility. In June, Uribe freed 150 jailed guerrillas in the failed hope the FARC would move ahead with a swap. "I am very pessimistic about it," said Holguín, who took office in August 2006. "They have a concept that they have the key to political power."

"If President Chavez is successful, he'll be like a hero for Colombians," said Fernando Gerbasi, a former Venezuelan ambassador to Colombia, on Globovision. "If he's not successful, at least he's tried."

But even if Chavez's plan succeeds, it would still affect only a tiny minority of Colombia's kidnapping victims. Latinamerica Press writer Susan Abad points out that, with more than 3,000 kidnapped Colombians, only 45 can hope for a political solution. The Fondo Nacional para la Defensa de la Libertad Personal (Fondolibertad), which works under the Defense Ministry, says there have been 23,144 kidnappings reported in Colombia since 1996. Of those cases reported, 6,772 are attributed to the FARC, 5,289 to the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), the country's second-largest guerrilla group, 3,775 to common crime, and 1,163 to paramilitaries. Authorities are unsure which group or individuals are responsible for the remaining 6,000 crimes. Fondolibertad says 3,143 people are now in the hands of kidnappers in Colombia.
Chavez pardons and releases 27 Colombian prisoners

On Sept. 1, Chavez freed more than two dozen Colombian prisoners who were arrested three years ago in an alleged plot against him. They were freed as a goodwill gesture he hopes will help facilitate a prisoner exchange in Colombia. The 27 Colombians who boarded a bus to return home after being pardoned by Chavez were among more than 100 people arrested three years ago on accusations of plotting to stage a rebellion and assassinate the Venezuelan leader (see NotiSur, 2004-05-21).

In a speech in Caracas, Chavez said he expected to meet soon with a high-ranking representative of the FARC to arrange a possible exchange of hundreds of imprisoned guerrillas for about 45 prominent rebel-held hostages. With Chavez's pardon, "a beautiful message is being sent to the world," Justice Minister Pedro Carreno said at a ceremony for the freed Colombians in the southwestern town of San Antonio.

Authorities say the men arrested on a ranch near Caracas in May 2004 were wearing military uniforms and were suspected of belonging to a Colombian paramilitary group. Chavez said they planned to attack the presidential palace. Those who were freed had been convicted of military rebellion. The pardon was granted to 41 Colombians in all, including 14 who reportedly had already gone free. Dozens of others were released previously.

Manuel Marandula contacts Chavez

Chavez said on Sept. 8 that he had received a letter from FARC leader Marulanda, while the smaller ELN held talks in Caracas with Colombian officials. "I started off accepting the role of observer but not anymore I've fallen into the role of mediator," said Chavez in televised remarks. "There are manifestations of good faith to open paths, to dialogue."

Chavez said he received Marulanda's letter two days earlier and that the FARC leader said he would send a representative to talks. "He still can't come to Venezuela. He's inviting me to go to Colombia. It's difficult for me to go into the jungles of Colombia," said Chavez, who did not reveal all the letter's contents. "But we're moving along." Chavez's prior invitation to hold negotiations in Venezuela was rebuffed when the FARC refused that option, insisting instead on the demilitarization of Pradera.

Chavez held a lengthy meeting Sept. 7 with Colombian peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo, who met separately with an ELN delegation during two days in Caracas. The rebel group was represented by Pablo Beltran, and the government said Venezuela's Ambassador to Colombia Pavel Rondon participated in one of the meetings. The ELN has been in ongoing peace negotiations with the Colombian government in multiple sessions hosted in Havana (see NotiSur, 2007-05-04).

Previous talks resulted in a cease-fire but have since stalled. Red Cross recovers 11 legislators' bodies from FARC The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said Sept. 8 it had recovered all 11 bodies presumed to be lawmakers killed in a shootout while held hostage by the FARC. The still-unidentified cadavers were found in an undisclosed area whose coordinates were provided by the FARC, the ICRC said in a statement.
The corpses were transported by helicopter to the southern city of Cali, where forensic experts supervised by the Organization of American States (OAS) will try to untangle the confused events surrounding the hostages' deaths. In late June, the FARC announced the lawmakers had been killed when an unidentified military group attacked the jungle camp where they were being held.

The government denied attempting a military rescue, an option opposed by most hostages' families, and initially accused the rebels of executing the hostages. It later claimed to have intelligence showing they died in a mistaken clash between two guerrilla fronts.

Hostages' family members were optimistic they would soon see an end to their ordeal, five years after guerrillas disguised as soldiers nabbed the lawmakers during a raid on the state legislature in Cali. "Finally we'll be able to have the certainty we've been waiting for and close this sad chapter in my life," said John Jairo Hoyos, son of one of the legislators.

Millions of people throughout Colombia last month protested the murder of the 11 lawmakers just weeks after Uribe freed the captured guerrillas, including the highest-ranking jailed rebel leader, Rodrigo Granda. The deaths of the lawmakers derailed joint efforts by France and Colombia to negotiate an exchange of prisoners.

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