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Colombian President Uribe Rescinds Venezuelan Mediation in Peace Talks

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Colombia-Venezuela relations have broken down after Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe removed Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez from the effort to negotiate with the Fuerza Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) for the release of hostages.

Family members of hostages and international governments had praised introducing Chavez as a mediator in the talks with the FARC as the best chance for a settlement of the hostage situation in years, but, three months after Chavez began talks, the right-wing Uribe government cut them off. Chavez, in return, froze all diplomatic relations with Colombia, leading to the worst state of bilateral affairs between the neighboring countries in decades.

Chavez mediation over just three months after it began
The Uribe government has long rejected FARC terms for a humanitarian exchange of captives. For his five years in office, Uribe has denied FARC demands for the release of about 500 FARC prisoners in exchange for dozens of hostages in FARC hands, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three US military contractors. He has also refused to create a demilitarized zone, saying the FARC would use it as a base for building up its strength as it did in prior negotiations.

The Uribe government has endorsed the use of military rescues, while family members of hostages generally reject that option, citing the likelihood that FARC guerrillas will execute captives or they will be killed in the crossfire. Gustavo Moncayo, the father of a kidnapped soldier, became a nationally and internationally known figure after conducting a foot trek across half the country to expose "the government's lies" and pressure Uribe to conduct negotiations (see NotiSur, 2007-08-10).

In August, Uribe said he was willing to create a safe zone for a period of 90 days in which FARC and government delegates could meet. He also promised to release all FARC prisoners who vowed not take up arms again. In return, he demanded the rebels free all their hostages. The FARC response was, "It is clear now that there will not be a humanitarian exchange with Mr. Uribe's government."

The FARC called for a demilitarized zone, which is different from a safe zone, and it wants the prisoners freed without any conditions. In September, Uribe allowed Chavez to begin conducting high-level talks with the rebels to pursue a humanitarian exchange (see NotiSur, 2007-09-14).

The invitation came about a month before regional elections in Colombia (see NotiSur, 2007-11-09). Chavez was invited along with Colombian opposition Sen. Piedad Cordoba to mediate in the hostage crisis. But on Nov. 19, Colombia gave Chavez until Dec. 31 to broker a deal on a swap of hostages for rebel prisoners. Two days later it cut off Chavez's role in negotiations. A Colombian
presidential spokesperson said on Nov. 22 that Chavez had broken an agreement not to speak directly to Colombia's Army chiefs about the hostages issue.

Uribe's office said in a statement that Sen. Cordoba had telephoned Colombian Army chief Gen. Mario Montoya and then passed the phone to Chavez. The statement said Uribe previously had made it clear to Chavez that he was opposed to the Venezuelan leader being in direct communication with Colombia's military chiefs. As a result, the facilitation efforts of Sen. Cordoba and President Chavez had been "terminated."

The BBC interpreted the sudden announcement that Chavez's efforts were being halted as a clear indication the Colombian president had lost patience with his Venezuelan counterpart. To some, Uribe, whose father was assassinated by the FARC in a 1983 kidnap attempt, was just waiting for an excuse to put a stop to Chavez's efforts. To others, Chavez acted clumsily.

If Uribe had any second thoughts about Chavez's role as a mediator, his telephone conversation with the head of the Colombian Army after Uribe had asked him not to speak to his generals was the last straw. The weekend of Nov 17-18, Chavez revealed to the media details of a private discussion he had held with Uribe on the hostage situation. He then made a high-profile visit to France to meet President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has been pushing for the release of Betancourt, a French-Colombian citizen.

Ahead of the meeting in Paris, Chavez had indicated that he hoped to bring evidence that Betancourt was alive. But instead of the hoped-for proof, Chavez said he had received a written assurance from the leader of the FARC, Manuel Marulanda, that such evidence would be forthcoming "before the end of the year." "The present [Colombian] peace commissioner has been trying to reach a deal for five years. We've been at it for only three months and in that time we have advanced more than in five years. We need to be patient," Chavez said.

Many commentators felt the Dec. 31 deadline was unrealistic. Colombia is Washington's biggest ally in the region with the US having pumped billions in military aid into the country's conflict, and Venezuela, together with Cuba, its main opponent. The two governments have generally maintained strong relations during the five years of the Uribe administration, with occasional flare-ups such as the kidnapping of a FARC leader from Caracas or disagreements on how to conduct the business of the Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN).

The 2004 kidnapping of a FARC chief led temporarily to Venezuela freezing ties with Colombia (see Notisur, 2005-01-28 and 2005-02-18), while Colombia's and Peru's signing free-trade agreements (FTAs) with the US led Chavez to pull out of the CAN (see Notisur, 2006-05-05 and 2006-06-23).

Colombian Foreign Minister Fernando Araujo, who was held hostage by the FARC for six years, once said that the rebels see Chavez as one of their "ideological leaders" and an "inspiration." He stopped short of accusing Chavez of being directly involved in the insurgency, but his remarks revealed how deep the rebels identify with the man who was until recently attempting to negotiate a peace deal.
Hostage family members condemn Uribe decision

Families of the hostages expressed their shock at developments. "It is clear that the Colombian president does not want to hear about a humanitarian accord," Betancourt's ex-husband Fabrice Delloye told French radio. "It is a sad day for the families of the hostages. We had always asked for total discretion to accomplish the humanitarian exchange," Marleny Orjuela, spokeswoman for the families of kidnapped soldiers and police officers, told Colombia's Caracol radio.

The Betancourt support committee called on President Sarkozy, who has made securing her a release a priority, to intervene immediately with Uribe to ensure mediation efforts continue. Sarkozy's office on Nov. 22 said that he would ask the French ambassador to Bogota "to deliver a letter to President Uribe asking him to maintain a dialogue with Hugo Chavez," the French news agency AFP reported. Sarkozy, however, is unlikely to have any significant sway with the FARC just like his predecessor Jacques Chirac (1995-2007). He can only pressure the Uribe government.

Chavez, by comparison, has regional roots and enjoys status as a leftist hero in the region. Venezuelan legislators allied with Chavez accused the Uribe government of putting obstacles in the way of negotiations, while Chavez accused members of the Uribe administration of seeking continued war for their own political benefit. Relatives of Colombian hostages traveled to Venezuela on Dec. 4 to seek the ongoing involvement of Chavez in securing their release. Bentancourt's mother, Yolanda Pulecio, criticized Uribe, saying, "I came to thank President Chavez and Senator Piedad Cordoba for all the efforts they've made. I'm very hurt over the very abrupt and very rude way in which President Uribe clogged everything up but it's not the first time he has clogged everything up."

Chavez freezes ties to Colombia

Chavez said on Nov. 26 that he had put relations with Colombia "in the freezer" after Uribe told him to stay out of talks with guerrillas. He called Uribe a "liar" and said he thinks the neighboring country "doesn't want peace" with the FARC. "I've lost all confidence in the Colombian government," Chavez said Nov. 25 in a speech. "Colombia deserves a better president."

The collapse of the agreement on hostage talks marks an escalation of tension with leaders who have demanded Chavez stop overstepping diplomatic boundaries as he promotes what he terms his "21st century socialism" across Latin America. "The truth, President Chavez, is that you are promoting an expansionist plan on the continent," Uribe said in response to Chavez's remarks, according to a speech posted on the Colombian government Web site. "You can't set fire to the continent like you do, one day talking against Spain, the next against the United States, treating Mexico poorly one day, and Peru the next." Chavez said reconciliation with Colombia is "impossible" until a new government is installed there.

Venezuela and Colombia, both each other's second-largest trading partner after the US, last month inaugurated a natural-gas pipeline linking the two countries. Uribe criticized Chavez's decision and accused him of wanting to help set up a Marxist FARC government in Colombia. "Chavez has just received several blows to his personal pride on an international level," said Demetrio Boersner,
a political science professor at the Universidad Catolica Andres Bello in Caracas who previously served as Venezuela's ambassador to Romania, Sweden, and Austria. "He's losing a lot of friends."

During a summit in Santiago, Chile, on Nov. 10, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet asked Chavez to stay out of a dispute with Bolivia, one of Venezuela's closest allies, regarding access to part of Chile's coastline. At the same summit, Spanish King Juan Carlos I told Chavez to "shut up" after the Venezuelan leader called a former Spanish prime minister a fascist. Chavez also said Nov. 25 that relations with Spain would be on ice until the Spanish king apologized for his comments.

Chavez faced a defeat on Dec. 2 when a referendum on constitutional reforms he sought failed by a narrow margin (see other story in this edition of NotiSur). Chavez's opposition to the candidacies of Peruvian President Alan Garcia and Mexico's Felipe Calderon in elections last year brought rebukes from both leaders. Chavez said the elections were fraudulent. "Breaking ties seems totally out of proportion to the situation," Colombian opposition party leader Carlos Gaviria of the Partido Liberal (PL), who ran against Uribe in presidential elections last year, said in a telephone interview. "Chavez is trying to consolidate his leadership in Latin America, but this is an exaggeration of his position."

Uribe returned to a common theme he uses when addressing his opposition, accusing opponents of supporting terrorism. "Your words, your attitudes, give the impression that you aren't interested in peace in Colombia, but rather that Colombia be a victim of a terrorist government of the FARC," said Uribe in the town of Calamar on Nov. 25. "The truth is, President Chavez, we need a mediation against terrorism, not people who legitimize terrorism."

Chavez responded by saying, "There are people very close to Uribe, people with lots of power, who don't want there to be an agreement. I wouldn't venture to say that (Uribe) doesn't want it, but I'm sure there are people very close to him who just want war" with the rebels.

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