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The Colombian guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) released two politician hostages in January following off-again, on-again negotiations led by Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. The government of Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe continued to maintain its hard line against negotiations with the FARC, even as some governments and hostage-family groups strongly criticized his stance. Uribe's orders to the military to advance on the FARC incensed family groups as endangering the captive's lives. Uribe administration officials attacked international governments that had sought to assist in the release, claiming they attacked the government and defended the rebels.

Baby Emmanuel: a political telenovela

The hostage release process, observed many press outlets, had the character of a telenovela, or soap opera, with a public-relations struggle regarding the paternity and identity of a 3-year-old boy, dashed hopes for the release of hostages followed by their release a week later, and a bitter public dispute between the presidents of Venezuela and Colombia.

Uribe had thrown Chavez out of the negotiation process three months after he had invited Chavez to mediate (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07). Chavez then froze Venezuelan relations with Colombia but kept pressing for a release of hostages, with family groups calling the Venezuelan president the best hope for obtaining progress in negotiations for a "humanitarian swap" of hostages for FARC prisoners.

A Venezuelan-led mission to free three hostages held by the FARC was suspended on Jan. 1. The rebels said the planned release was not possible because of government military operations, according to Chavez. But Uribe claimed that no new operations were underway and that the rebels may not have been in possession of one of the hostages.

The FARC had promised Chavez that they would release two women and a boy. Two of the three were Clara Rojas, an aide to ex-presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, with whom she was kidnapped in 2002, and Rojas's son, Emmanuel, said to have been fathered by one of her captors. The third was former congresswoman Consuelo Gonzalez de Perdomo, who was kidnapped in 2001. The FARC holds some 45 high-profile hostages who are considered "exchangeable."

But it is believed the guerrillas hold about 750 hostages in total, some for political leverage but many for ransom. As the new year began, Venezuelan military helicopters that were to have collected the three hostages returned home after the FARC did not hand over coordinates at which to pick up the three. On Dec. 31, Chavez read out what he said was a letter from the FARC on television. Military operations "impede us for now from turning over" the three hostages, the FARC were quoted as saying.
But Uribe accused the rebels of lying. He said that the rebels could not keep their promises because they did not have the boy, who had been living in foster care in the capital Bogota under a different name, Juan David Gomez, for more than two years. "The FARC can't keep the promise to free the hostages because they no longer have the child, Emmanuel, in their power," he said. Uribe asked relatives of Rojas for DNA samples to prove that a three-year-old boy in the Colombian capital was really the missing Emmanuel.

Fifteen members of the hostages' families, who had not seen their loved ones for more than five years, continued waiting in the Venezuelan capital Caracas. The BBC reported that it was believed that the Colombian government wanted to regain the initiative with respect to the prisoner exchange and did not want Chavez, perceived as being too friendly with the FARC, to hijack negotiations. Representatives of five Latin American governments were on hand during the New Year effort to recover the three hostages.

Observers from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, and Ecuador participated in the effort. DNA tests taken by the Colombian government appeared to prove that the boy in the orphanage was Emmanuel, a fact Uribe treated as a public-relations coup against the FARC. The results of the DNA test on Jan. 4 suggested that that the FARC misled Chavez and the world when it promised to release the boy along with the two women. The DNA analysis showed a complete match between the mitochondria in the blood of Rojas' mother and the boy, chief federal prosecutor Mario Iguaran announced, meaning that there was a "very high probability" that "this boy belongs to the Rojas family."

Venezuela complained that Colombia had not permitted its own team of specialists to take blood samples from the boy to make its own confirmation of the DNA results. "I told the Colombian foreign minister that that attitude casts a cloak of doubt on the investigation," Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro told state television. DNA tests by a European laboratory were still pending, after which child-welfare agents would determine whether the Rojas family would be granted temporary custody.

The story of Emmanuel has transfixed Colombia since a Colombian journalist first reported in a 2006 book expose that the child was born to one of the rebels' most prominent hostages, former vice presidential candidate Rojas, the pregnancy a result of a relationship with one of her captors, reportedly a rank-and-file guerrilla named Rigo. Igurian said DNA tests performed on Rojas' family members and the child in the Bogota foster home proved that the boy known as Juan David Gomez was actually Rojas' son.

The boy had been handed over at the age of 11 months by Jose Gomez, a campesino who said he was the child's great-uncle, to child-welfare workers in San Jose de Guaviare, a town in a FARC-dominated zone of eastern Colombia. The baby had a broken arm and was sick from malnutrition and leishmaniasis, an infection common in the jungle. The baby was rushed to Bogota for an operation to heal his arm, then sent to a foster home in the capital, one of 6 million orphaned minors placed under the state's care. He lived there for two years in obscurity. Then prosecutors received an anonymous tip that Emmanuel was no longer in the FARC's control.
Three days later, Jose Gomez emerged again, saying he was actually the boy's father and wanted him back. The government put everything together with the help of the 2006 testimony of Frank Pinchao, a former police officer who escaped from nine years in captivity to tell of the birth of Emmanuel, during which he said rebel midwives accidentally broke the boy's arm in a risky jungle delivery.

Jose Gomez then confessed that he had no relation to the child, saying a local FARC commander entrusted him with the baby in exchange for extra money he never provided. He said the FARC threatened him with death if he didn't produce the child by Dec. 30, according to the Colombian government.

The press counted the result as a major embarrassment for the FARC, exposing its plan to release the three hostages as either an elaborate ruse, internal disarray, or miscommunication between rebel commanders and the decentralized units where the hostages were being held.

Colombia's government celebrated even as Venezuela complained Colombia did not let Venezuelan doctors perform their own tests. "This proves again that the FARC is lying to the world, laughing in the face of national and international public opinion by offering someone they don't have and then blaming the government in a Machiavellian and macabre way," Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said.

In a statement dated Jan. 2 and posted Jan. 4 on a pro-rebel Web site, FARC acknowledged that the boy in Bogota was Emmanuel. But the statement charged that Uribe ordered him "kidnapped" to sabotage Chavez's efforts to broker the release. The FARC said it would follow through on its promise to hand over Emmanuel's mother and former congresswoman Gonzalez to Chavez, but did not give details.

The authenticity of the statement could not be determined, but it was posted to a site that frequently carries FARC communiques. A week later, Colombia agreed to a Venezuelan mission to secure the release of Rojas and Gonzalez.

Colombia's Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) would oversee the mission. Venezuelan aircraft picked up the two women on Jan. 10. The international press appeared to want to put a negative light on the first high-profile negotiated release of FARC hostages in years.

The BBC, for example, ran the headline, "Little Optimism after Hostage Releases." The press had characterized the suspension of the rescue effort as a "failure," even though government officials from Venezuela and Argentina had said that the mission had not yet failed. Walking off a plane and into the arms of tearful relatives in the Venezuelan capital, Rojas wore a necklace with a picture of her son, Emmanuel, whom she has not seen in almost three years. Elvira Forero, head of Colombia's child-welfare agency, said Jan. 10 that she spoke with Rojas, who was then still in Caracas, and assured her that Colombian authorities were ready to hand over Emmanuel "whenever she decides she's ready."
In the meantime, Forero said games were being used to teach the child to recognize his given name, which was changed after he was taken from his mother. In an interview Jan. 11 with Colombian W Radio, Rojas shied away from discussing the boy's father, one of her guerrilla captors. "He never knew I was pregnant or not from me anyway," said Rojas, without providing further details about their relationship.

Rojas said she did tell fellow hostage Betancourt, a presidential candidate with whom Rojas was kidnapped in 2002 while campaigning in a FARC-dominated area of southern Colombia. "Ingrid was the first person I told," Rojas said. "She immediately offered her unconditional support." But soon, she said, the rebels separated her from Betancourt as well. Three American defense contractors who were taken hostage in 2003 also were present when the child was born, Rojas said.

Family members criticize Uribe

On Jan. 13, she reunited with Emmanuel. Family members attack Uribe as "a cold, inhuman being" Family members of captives lashed out at Uribe's government during the process, with the mother of Betancourt calling him a "cold and inhuman being," and Gustavo Moncayo, a prominent activist, calling for an exchange, saying Uribe wanted only to "kill" guerrillas and not get a release. Moncayo is the father of a soldier held by the FARC for 10 years who walked across the country calling for a swap (see NotiSur, 2007-08-10).

At a Jan. 7 press conference, Moncayo said Uribe "is calling for killing, to kill guerrillas, while others are calling for a humanitarian exchange." He attacked Uribe's unwillingness to remove troops from the Florida and Pradera regions in the southwestern department of Valle del Cauca, a condition the FARC have required to negotiate an exchange. US court sentences FARC commander to 60 years A 60-year US prison sentence imposed on a Colombian rebel for kidnapping three Americans seems likely to complicate efforts to free the defense contractors as well as dozens of other hostages.

On Jan. 28, a federal judge in Washington, DC, imposed the maximum sentence on Ricardo Palmera, a senior rebel commander known as Simon Trinidad, who was convicted in the kidnapping of Keith Stansell, Marc Gonsalves, and Tom Howes. The men, contractors with Northrop Grumman, were abducted in February 2003 by the FARC after their plane crashed on a surveillance mission.

The three US men and French-Colombian politician Betancourt are among about 45 "high-value" hostages the rebels offered to swap for hundreds of guerrillas imprisoned in Colombia as well as Palmera and another FARC rebel, known as Sonia, imprisoned in Texas on drug-trafficking charges.

"The FARC have always said that the freeing of Trinidad and Sonia are part of any swap," said Vicente Torrijos, a political analyst with the Universidad del Rosario. "Without them there might not be any negotiations." Analysts familiar with the FARC say a possible solution would be to separate the talks: one for a swap of Colombian hostages for rebels in Colombian jails; another for Trinidad and Sonia for the three Americans. "I hope they are not going to be too radical and will be open to two different negotiations," said Carlos Lozano, an editor of the Partido Comunista Colombiano (PCC) paper Voz who has acted as a mediator between the rebels and the government.
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