2-8-2008

Venezuela's Chavez Urges Colombia to Recognize FARC as Belligerent Force

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13662

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Venezuela's Chavez Urges Colombia to Recognize FARC as Belligerent Force

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2008-02-08

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez has continued to play a role in Colombia's dealings with the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), calling on the Colombian government to remove the "terrorist" label from the rebel organization to make negotiations possible. Colombia and other powers have rejected the call, along with thousands of demonstrators who participated in mass demonstrations against the FARC in dozens of cities around the world on Feb. 4.

Chavez: status would further peace prospects

The Chavez proposal came amid efforts to obtain the peaceful release of high-profile hostages the FARC holds. The FARC released two politicians in January, former congressmember Consuelo Gonzalez de Perdomo and Clara Rojas, an aide to ex-presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, with whom she was kidnapped in 2002 (see NotiSur, 2008-02-01). Betancourt, who was campaigning against then candidate and now President Alvaro Uribe, remains in captivity.

Many family members hailed Chavez's involvement as the first significant prospect for a "humanitarian exchange" of FARC prisoners for hostages held by the FARC, but clashes between Uribe and Chavez hampered the process repeatedly and drove bilateral relations to their worst point in years (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07). Allegations that rebels have crossed in and out of Venezuela and that they have access to Venezuelan-manufactured ammunition has worsened the distrust.

The release of Rojas and Gonzalez was the most important handover in the Colombian conflict since 2001. The FARC said the unilateral move showed its willingness to negotiate regarding remaining hostages. The FARC, however, rejected unilateral prisoner releases that Uribe conducted in 2007 (see NotiSur, 2007-06-29). Correspondents said the release of the two political figures was a triumph for Chavez, who greeted the women in Caracas on Jan. 10 following their release. Chavez said he wanted to repeat the success with dozens of other captives.

Chavez said on Jan. 13, shortly after the release of Rojas and Gonzalez, that Uribe's government should recognize that there was a state of civil war within Colombia and treat the FARC and the smaller Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) as lawful combatant armies rather than terrorist groups, a move that would fall under Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions.

The idea was that formal recognition would create incentives for the FARC to come to negotiations more readily and to avoid war crimes. "I ask you [Uribe] that we start recognizing the FARC and the ELN as insurgent forces in Colombia and not terrorist groups, and I ask the same of the governments of this continent and the world," Chavez said.
He said the FARC and ELN were armies with a political project and should be recognized as such. Chavez said in a television broadcast, "President Uribe, if you recognize the FARC as a belligerent force, and the FARC accepts, the FARC immediately would come under the Geneva Conventions," which regulate warfare under international law. "They could not use kidnapping, for example....I do not agree with kidnapping, it is horrible to me."

Paul Wolf, an international human rights lawyer in Washington, DC, echoed Chavez's arguments, saying, "Recognition of belligerent status brings with it the responsibility of the guerrillas to act in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, which, among other things, prohibit kidnapping, killing civilians, and using indiscriminate weapons. Opening this door for the FARC might, for the first time in 50 years, offer an incentive for the group to mend its ways. For the ELN, decimated by the murder of thousands of its cadre over the last decade, it could offer a way to get out of this alive."

The ELN has been in negotiations with the Colombian government, although they have slowed down or stalled in recent months (see NotiSur, 2007-05-04). The Colombian Army captured a senior ELN commander on Jan. 7, the government said, calling it a major blow to the guerrillas that could push them closer to a peace deal. Others questioned whether it would slow peace talks. Carlos Marin Guarin, who uses the nom de guerre Pablito, was detained in the capital, Bogota, after months of intelligence gathering, Army chief Gen. Mario Montoya said. He did not give further details on the operation.

**Uribe, US, EU want to keep terrorist label on FARC**

Colombia's president swiftly rejected Chavez's idea, saying the insurgents were terrorists who funded their operations with cocaine smuggling, recruited children, and planted land mines in their effort to topple a democratically elected government.

"The only thing they have produced is displacement, pain, unemployment, and poverty," he said. "In the moment that peace with the FARC advances, the government of Colombia would be the first to stop calling them terrorists and the first to ask the world that, as a contribution to peace, it no longer call them terrorists," Uribe said on Jan. 15 in Guatemala, where he was attending the inauguration of the country's President Alvaro Colom. "In the moment that the FARC demonstrates good faith, that it wants to negotiate peace, the government is willing to concede to them all the benefits within the Constitution to facilitate that peace process."

The FARC and the ELN say they are fighting for a fairer distribution of wealth. In 2002 the European Union (EU) joined the US in classifying the FARC as a terrorist group. Northern powers rallied to Uribe's side in the issue. On Jan. 22, the EU insisted it would not remove the FARC from its "terror list", despite Chavez's call. "The answer is no. There is no reason to change our position," said EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana after talks with Uribe in Brussels. "Uribe has our full support in the battle he is waging against terrorism. The terrorists must free the hostages with no conditions."

Uribe was on a European tour to discuss ways to free the dozens of hostages held by the group. European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso also praised Colombia's efforts to secure the release of the remaining hostages. He welcomed the release of the two women, which he said
afforded "new hope." But, he said, "We cannot forget the other 700, including Ingrid Betancourt, who are being held in inhuman conditions, many of them for several years."

Uribe said his government was seeking peace but taking the FARC off the list would not be a useful step. He praised "Europe's resolve" in the matter and called for the reactivation of the mediation role of France, Spain, and Switzerland in negotiations. The US, whose courts recently sentenced senior FARC commander Ricardo Palmera, aka Simon Trinidad, to 60 years in prison for his role in kidnapping three US military contractors, rejected Chavez's proposal.

The editors of The Washington Post called Venezuela's president an "Ally to Kidnappers" on Jan. 16, in an editorial that failed to mention the Geneva Convention-based logic behind Chavez's call. It claimed the FARC had "discarded the Marxist ideology it wielded in the 1960s for the mercenary causes of abduction and drug trafficking" and rejected Chavez's claim that the FARC possessed a "political project."

**FARC plans to release three more politicians**

The FARC said at the end of January that it would free three ailing politicians it has held for more than six years. In a communique, the FARC said the planned liberation sprang from efforts by Chavez and "other friendly governments" to seek a solution to Colombia's long-running conflict.

The FARC set no date for the promised release of Gloria Polanco, Luis Eladio Perez, and Orlando Beltran all Colombians kidnapped in 2001. But it said it wanted to free the hostages on Colombian territory to Chavez or someone chosen by him. The communique, dated Jan. 31, was received late Feb. 2 by news organizations including the leftist ANNCOL news agency, which regularly publishes FARC statements online.

Interior Minister Carlos Holguin told reporters Feb. 3 that his government welcomed the FARC's gesture. "We're disposed to do anything necessary so these compatriots regain their liberty." The FARC wants to exchange nearly four dozen hostages held for as long as a decade for hundreds of imprisoned rebels. But Uribe has rejected its demand that rebel representatives be allowed to carry arms in a proposed demilitarized zone to hold hostage talks.

The FARC did not specify the ailments of the three hostages it said it was releasing. Letters penned by fellow captives that Rojas and Gonzalez carried out of the jungle in January described debilitating ailments including malaria, chronic diarrhea, and diabetes. Perez, at the time a senator, was kidnapped in June 2001.

Other hostages say he has been held in jungle camps alongside Betancourt and the three US contractors, seized when their surveillance plane crashed in FARC territory in early 2003. Polanco, a political leader, was kidnapped from her apartment in the southern city of Neiva along with her two sons in August 2001. The sons were released soon after. She has recently been held in a group with Beltran, an ex-congressman also snatched in August 2001.

In a letter he wrote to his wife in December, Beltran spoke of being kept in "concentration camp-like conditions," she said in a radio interview. "They're forced to sleep chained to a tree." Mass marches
against FARC worldwide Hundreds of thousands of Colombians wearing white T-shirts marched in
their homeland and abroad Feb. 4 to demand that the country's largest rebel group stop kidnapping
people and release those it holds.

The idea of the protests against the FARC was born less than a month earlier on the social
networking Web site Facebook, and nearly 100,000 people in 165 cities around the world confirmed
their participation. The protests were concentrated in Colombia and Latin American capitals, though
there were smaller protests in other places including Sweden, Hungary, France, Italy, India, and
Miami, Florida.

In Bogota, the protest swelled, with long lines of people shouting "Freedom! Freedom!" and
marching along Bogota's main thoroughfare. Television channels suspended normal programming
to broadcast marches around the country, and anchors wore the white T-shirts symbolizing peace.
In between reports, the channels aired proof-of-life videos of hostages who remain captive in the
FARC's jungle camps. Crowd estimates in Colombia varied wildly, with estimates at the Bogota
march ranging from 500,000 to 2 million.

"I hope the FARC is listening," said former hostage Rojas, who took part in the march. The FARC
called the march an attempt to bolster the political fortunes of its enemy, Uribe. The president
enjoys high political popularity in opinion polls, with percentages of approval ranging in the 70s and
80s.

"If the suffering of those in captivity has been unjustifiably prolonged...this has been because of the
inhuman intransigence and worthless pride of President Uribe," rebel leaders said in a statement
released Feb. 1. Uribe addressed a packed public square in the northeastern city of Valledupar on
Feb. 4. "To our fellow countrymen and women who live abroad and who today have united with the
rest of their compatriots, we want to extend our gratitude," he said.

In neighboring Venezuela, more than 2,000 people wearing white T-shirts marched in Caracas. In
Panama, hundreds of Colombians demonstrated, while some 400 people shouted anti-FARC slogans
in Argentina. In Mexico City, about 200 people gathered in front of the Angel de la Independencia
monument. In Stockholm, protesters bowed their heads for a minute of silence, while a couple
dozen people in Hungary protested for an hour outside parliament. Television images showed
Colombians and Americans at rallies in Washington, New York, and Miami. Others joined events in
Paris and Madrid.

Inside Colombia, the mobilization exposed deep divisions about how to end the decades-long
conflict with Latin America's oldest and strongest leftist insurgency. For weeks, invitations to
the march flew through cyberspace, mainly among the young and relatively wealthy who use
Facebook, in a country where only about one in four can afford to use the Internet regularly. But, as
momentum grew, so did criticism of the march's narrow focus.

Many relatives of hostages feared the protests could endanger their loved ones, while others argued
the march should denounce all violent groups, including the far-right militias critics say are backed
by politicians in Uribe's camp. Families have strongly attacked Uribe's military orders to "enclose
and advance" on FARC camps. Relatives' groups reject Uribe's preferred tactic of military rescue, saying it runs too great a risk that the rebels will kill their hostages or that the captives will die in the crossfire.

-- End --