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Colombian FARC Rebels Release Four More High-Profile Hostages

by LADB Staff

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The Colombian rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) released four former congressmembers it had held captive for several years on Feb. 27, the second release in 2008 (see NotiSur, 2008-02-01). The FARC said it would not unilaterally release any more hostages without concessions from the Colombian government. Three days after the release, the Colombian military attacked a rebel camp in Ecuador, killing several rebel soldiers including senior commander Raul Reyes (see other story in this issue of NotiSur).

Observers suggested that further hostage releases would be unlikely after the attack on the FARC camp. Venezuelan/Red Cross helicopters pick up lawmakers The Colombian rebels freed the four lawmakers after holding each of them for at least six years, seeking to persuade the international community to strike them from lists of terrorist organizations (see NotiSur, 2008-02-08). The rebels handed over the four to members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Venezuela's interior minister around midday Feb. 27 in a clearing in Colombia's southern jungle.

Two Venezuelan helicopters with doctors aboard flew them to Venezuelan territory, on their way to family reunions in Caracas. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez spoke to them by phone. "They are safe and sound," said Jesse Chacon, a top Chavez aide. He said Venezuela hoped the release "will help us continue advancing on the path to achieving liberations of the remainder and of course to what we all yearn for peace in Colombia."

Chavez's intercession in Colombia's long-running conflict and the hostage releases it has reaped has raised the profile of the FARC as it seeks to persuade the European Union (EU) to remove it from its list of international terrorist groups. The FARC has been fighting for more than four decades for a more equitable distribution of wealth in Colombia but has in recent years drawn wide reproach for its methods. It kidnaps civilians for ransom and funds itself largely through cocaine trafficking.

The four hostages were freed in the same region of Guaviare department where the FARC released two other politicians on Jan. 10, Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez. Those released on Feb. 27 were former deputies Gloria Polanco and Orlando Beltran and former senators Luis Eladio Perez and Jorge Gechem. All were said to be ailing Polanco with thyroid problems, Gechem with heart, back, and ulcer problems.

"Such a kidnapping surely tears out one's insides," Daniel Polanco, the youngest of Gloria Polanco's three sons, told Colombia's Caracol radio from Caracas. He was 11 years old when his mother was kidnapped. His two older brothers were seized with his mother and released in 2004 after a ransom was paid. Their father was later murdered, allegedly by the FARC. Daniel Polanco said they had bought their mother flowers, balloons, two or three changes of clothes, and cosmetics "so she can be pretty the first days."
Aboard the helicopters were Venezuela's Interior Minister Ramon Rodriguez Chacin and Colombian Sen. Piedad Cordoba, a close Chavez collaborator and opposition-party member, as well as four ICRC representatives and doctors. In a statement on a pro-rebel Web site, the FARC thanked Chavez for his mediation efforts.

After the January release, Chavez called on the international community to recognize the rebels as a legitimate armed opposition group, rather than calling them terrorists, arguing that they would be subject to the Geneva Conventions and would have incentive to negotiate. The rebels repeated their demand that a safe zone be created in the Florida and Pradera regions in the southwestern department of Valle del Cauca for talks that could lead to a swap of rebel-held hostages for imprisoned rebels. And they accused the hard-line government of President Alvaro Uribe, Washington's top ally in Latin America, of mounting "a gigantic military operation" in the area where the hostages were freed.

The FARC has proposed trading some 40 high-value captives including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three US defense contractors for hundreds of imprisoned guerrillas. It has held some captives for a decade. But Uribe has resisted their conditions to begin a dialogue on a prisoner swap, also known in the Colombian press as a "humanitarian exchange." His Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos told reporters Feb. 27 that the FARC "has always used the swap to win political space and try to discredit the government."

"This release is very positive, but the larger hostage-for-prisoner exchange process is as stuck as ever," said Adam Isacson, Colombia analyst with the Washington-based think tank Center for International Policy (CIP). "With this second unilateral release, the FARC are making clear that they only want to work with Hugo Chavez, as their preferred facilitator." Uribe has ruled out Chavez as an intermediary (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07).

**US contractors’ letters seized**

A newly freed hostage said Feb. 28 said that FARC rebels confiscated letters by three US military contractors asking for help from President Bush and other leading US politicians. Ex-Sen. Perez also said that the three contractors, with whom he shared his last six months of jungle captivity, still suffer injuries from the plane crash five years ago that landed them in guerrilla hands.

Before Perez parted ways on Feb. 4 with the US contractors Thomas Howes, Marc Gonsalves, and Keith Stansell they gave him letters they had written to President Bush, to leading Democrats in Congress "who had shown solidarity with them," to House speaker Nancy Pelosi, and the leading presidential candidates. They also wrote The New York Times and The Washington Post, he said in an interview with Caracol radio. But FARC rebels took the letters away in a search before freeing Perez.

Speaking from Venezuela, Perez said the gist of the letters was a plea not to be left "in the ostracism of the Colombian jungle." Perez said Howes, 54, suffered a head blow during the crash "that gives him very strong recurring headaches. He's got a problem with high blood pressure with very little medical treatment, almost none, and it's very difficult to get drugs for high blood pressure." He said
the three were badly shaken by the 60-year prison sentence a US judge slapped on Ricardo Palmera, a Colombian rebel, on Jan. 28 after his conviction in connection with their captivity.

Though Palmera never denied his leading role in the FARC, he said he never saw the three US citizens or kept them hostage. "They understand that the FARC can impose the same sentence on them," Perez told Caracol in separate interview. A rebel commander vowed to hold the three contractors "for 60 years in a jungle prison."

FARC guerrillas captured the three when their surveillance plane crashed in rebel territory in southern Colombia on Feb. 13, 2003. Perez said that he imagined the three's spirits had been lifted somewhat by US Ambassador William Brownfield's recent statements that Washington would be disposed to review Palmera's prison term if it would lead to their liberation. "I think that that gave them a little bit of hope, that finally the US government was concerned about them," he said. Brownfield has stressed that the US system of government prohibits the executive branch from interfering with a prison sentence though he has said Washington has not excluded any avenue for trying to secure the release of the three contractors.

**Relatives, freed lawmakers call for more releases**

"This [US] government better get on the right track and bring these guys home," said Jo Rosano, mother of Marc Gonsalves. "Enough is enough." The freed lawmakers appealed to Chavez to press for the freedom of the remaining captives.

The Venezuelan president who coordinated the release made a direct plea to the rebels' commander to urgently consider the health situation of Betancourt, one of the most high-profile of those still in captivity. Gloria Polanco made a passionate plea for Chavez to help win the release of Betancourt, a dual French-Colombian citizen who has become a cause celebre in Europe.

"As a woman and a mother, I ask from my heart here in front of everyone that you fight to get Ingrid free as soon as possible," Polanco implored. "She is very ill, president, very ill. She has recurrent hepatitis B and is near the end." Chavez turned to TV cameras recording the meeting and asked rebel leader Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda, "from my heart to change Ingrid's location. Move her to a base closer to you, while we continue working to pave the way for her definitive release."

Chavez called Betancourt's case "urgent." He also pledged "to continue doing all we can to liberate the very last" of the hostages. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, speaking on Colombian television encouraged the FARC to continue what he called its "strategy of humanitarian release." After the raid in Ecuador on March 1, however, and the subsequent diplomatic crisis among Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, observers were pessimistic about the likelihood of more hostage releases.

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