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Colombian Military Rescues 15 FARC Hostages
by LADB Staff
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A Colombian military operation on July 2 rescued 15 hostages held by the rebel guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Among the high-profile hostages were former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who had been held since she was kidnapped during her 2002 campaign (see NotiSur, 2002-03-01), three US military contractors whose plane was shot down in 2003 (see NotiSur, 2003-02-28), and 11 members of Colombia's security forces.

The event served as a major propaganda coup for the Colombian military and President Alvaro Uribe, who has been facing major political scandals as numerous allies in the Congress faced prosecution for corruption and ties to paramilitary death squads (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16, 2008-06-27).

Elaborate ruse pulled off without injury
The liberation occurred July 2 after military spies tricked rebels into giving up the hostages without a single injury, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said. The operation freed 15 hostages including Colombian soldiers and police, Santos said. The yearlong effort by the Colombian military was called Operacion Jaque (Operation Check), a reference to chess terminology.

Colombian forces infiltrated the FARC and ultimately fooled the rebels into thinking they were transferring the hostages to another location. The hostages were loaded onto a helicopter that the FARC believed belonged to a friendly nongovernmental organization (NGO), when it was really under the control of the Colombian armed forces.

Military agents pretended to be Italian, Australian, and Arab members of the fictitious NGO who would ferry the captives to the guerrillas' leader. Trained for weeks by actors, they persuaded the two rebels who boarded the helicopter to leave their weapons behind. In the air, they subdued the guerrillas one was left with a large purple bruise across his cheek and nose and they announced to the hostages their captivity was over. "We waited and waited years for this," a freed Colombian soldier yelled into a video camera. The Colombian government used the video footage to showcase its operation and denied reports other nations took part or that it paid a ransom to free the captives.

Santos said the military-intelligence agents infiltrated the guerrilla ranks and led the local commander in charge of the hostages, alias Cesar, to believe they were going to take them by helicopter to Alfonso Cano, the guerrillas' supreme leader. Surrounded by military commandos, Cesar and the other guerrillas gave up without a fight as the helicopters took the hostages to a military base in Guaviare.

The 44-year-old FARC had considered Betancourt and the three Americans its most valuable bargaining chips, seeking to force the government to demilitarize the Florida and Pradera regions...
in the southwestern department of Valle del Cauca before it would commence negotiations for release of the hostages. Because Betancourt also holds French citizenship, France's government has campaigned for her release. She turned 46 on Christmas Day 2007.

In Paris, Betancourt's son Lorenzo Delloye-Betancourt called her release after six years of captivity, "if true, the most beautiful news of my life."

The families of the three US hostages, Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell, also celebrated the release. The US contractors were captured a year after Betancourt when their drug-surveillance plane went down. They worked for a Northrup Grumman Corp. subsidiary as Pentagon contractors. They were the longest-held American hostages in the world.

Since their abduction, families of the US hostages received only two "proof-of-life" videos, the latest in November 2007. That tape also showed the first images in years of Betancourt, who had not been seen since 2003. The images, along with letters and reports from other hostages, described a once-vibrant, confident woman slowly succumbing to Hepatitis B, tropical skin diseases, and depression. One former hostage said Betancourt was kept chained to a tree after trying to escape. Betancourt's family waged a campaign for her freedom, organizing marches and events in Colombia and France, where her case became a cause celebre.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy implored the FARC to free the ailing Betancourt and sent a mission to Colombia to try to gain access to her. He also urged Colombia's government to contact the rebels. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez also tried to negotiate Betancourt's release as part of a prisoner swap (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07, 2008-03-07). But none of the efforts could bridge the gap between the guerrillas and Colombian President Uribe, whose father was killed by the FARC and who has made the group's defeat through military means the cornerstone of his presidency.

Colombia's government even criticized Betancourt's family for its efforts to raise her public profile. With all the interest in her, officials said, Betancourt became too valuable a bargaining chip to be traded for anything less than a comprehensive deal. The family countered that its work had drawn attention to the plight of all Colombia's kidnap victims. Hostages' family members had frequently called on the government to avoid military rescues, given the risk of firefights or other snafus that could lead to the accidental killing in crossfire or deliberate execution of the hostages.

In 2007, 11 Colombian legislators held captive by the FARC died in combat under disputed circumstances (see NotiSur, 2007-08-10), and another group of hostages died in a botched release attempt in 2003 (see NotiSur, 2003-05-09). Betancourt will not decide on future political plans now After reuniting with her children in Colombia, Betancourt quickly traveled to France, arriving to a hero's welcome on July 4. She said that she cried a lot during her six years as a prisoner in the Colombian jungle. Today, she said, "I cry with joy."

French president meets Betancourt

President Sarkozy met Betancourt on the tarmac of an air base southwest of Paris, showering her with hugs, kisses, and smiles. Sarkozy praised Betancourt as a beacon of hope for people in dire situations. "All those, like you, who suffer throughout the world should know that...there is a light
at the end of the tunnel," said the French leader, flanked by his wife, former model Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, and Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner.

Betancourt's release was greeted in France with a flood of enthusiasm. Hundreds of people, some waving Colombian or French flags, many with cameras, lined up behind police barriers around Paris' Elysee presidential palace in hopes of catching a glimpse of her. "France is my home and you are my family," Betancourt said in an address from the wind-swept runway broadcast live on French television.

Addressing the French people, she said their support and mobilization in her favor "saved my life." Speaking later at a reception in a gilded hall at the presidential palace, Betancourt urged Sarkozy to keep fighting for the liberation of the hostages still in the FARC's hands, estimated by Colombia's government to number about 700. "I'm sorry to ask you this like this, in public," she told Sarkozy as a crowd of hundreds cheered and cameras flashed. "But we still need you. We cannot leave [the hostages] where they are. They are suffering, they are alone." She said she expected any future efforts to win the release of hostages to be even more difficult.

Asked about a Swiss radio report that a ransom was paid to the rebels for freeing her and the other hostages and that the release was staged, Betancourt said she could not doubt the authenticity of what she lived through. "Honestly, in my heart, I don't think I can be easily duped," she said. She described the memory of her defeated captor, "this man hunched on the ground, eyes blindfolded, hands behind his back, hands and feet tied. I don't think someone who had received a ransom could have had such an expression."

Senior Colombian military officials also denied a ransom was paid. Asked about her plans, Betancourt said she wanted to live with her children, Melanie, 22, and Lorenzo, 19, who reached adulthood in Paris during her captivity.

Betancourt did not comment on possible plans to return to politics in France or in Colombia, saying only that she wanted to dedicate her life to helping improve those of others. Betancourt also said she hoped to write several books and perhaps even a play. "I think that could possibly allow me to say things I can't say in another way and free myself," said Betancourt.

Betancourt thanked Uribe, against whom she was running when she was kidnapped, and said he "has been a very good president." However, she said, "I continue to aspire to serve Colombia as president," although she said she was making no concrete political plans during her readjustment period.

Betancourt's release was a big image boost for Sarkozy, just as it was for Uribe; even Sarkozy's rivals acknowledged his diplomatic efforts kept up the pressure on Colombia to find ways to get her released. But Sarkozy's top aide said he was not informed of the operation that freed her. French officials said Betancourt would be awarded the Legion of Honor on Bastille Day, July 14, France's biggest national holiday. She was also scheduled to address the National Assembly, the lower house of France's parliament, on July 9.
President Sarkozy's office said Betancourt would be decorated along with other Legion of Honor recipients. Betancourt's release turned the politician into an international media star, with celebrations of her liberation breaking out throughout Latin America and Europe and major coverage of her in countless press outlets.

Global rallies for release of remaining hostages
At the July 20 rally, Betancourt urged her former captors to release all hostages. She was leading a rally in Paris one in a series of global demonstrations calling for an end to kidnapping and for peace. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Colombia, some holding photographs of missing loved ones. Authorities believe that the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), another leftist rebel group, is holding up to 2,000 more people in remote jungle and mountain camps, beyond the 700 the FARC holds.

Betancourt read out a list of names of those still held by the FARC and called for their release. "We want freedom for everyone," Betancourt said in Spanish, amid applause and chants from the crowd of "Libertad." Her speech was also broadcast in Colombia, where Independence Day celebrations became a mass national appeal for an end to hostage-taking and for peace moves between the government and the FARC.

Colombian pop star Shakira opened events in the Amazonian town of Leticia by singing the national anthem, flanked by President Uribe and visiting dignitaries. Uribe pledged to work for the release of all hostages. Marches took place in most of the country's more than 1,000 municipalities, with the biggest turnout in the capital Bogota. A previous demonstration in February this year saw almost a million people take to the streets in Bogota alone (see NotiSur, 2008-02-08).

FARC seizes 10 more hostages
While this is the latest blow to the FARC and the most prominent one in media coverage, it is noteworthy that the military operation was called Operation Check, not Checkmate. About two weeks after Betancourt's release, the FARC kidnapped 10 people traveling down the Atrato River in the western province of Choco. While being badly hit by government offensives and a series of recent setbacks, the FARC has not softened its position.

Longtime FARC watchers are reluctant to proclaim the rebellion over. The guerrillas have hunkered down in Colombia's forbidding jungles and mountains, planting more land mines in hopes of outlasting Uribe. "Those who are announcing that the FARC is defeated, that it's done for, are mistaken," said Carlos Lozano, editor of the Partido Comunista Colombiano (PCC) weekly Voz and a longtime mediator with the rebels. "The FARC remains a big guerrilla force spread across the nation with the capacity still to destabilize."

Nevertheless, the military now appears to have the upper hand. For the first time, more Colombian guerrillas deserted last year than died in combat, said Gen. Freddy Padilla, the armed forces chief. By official count, 2,480 rebels gave up compared with 1,893 killed in action. The FARC is now down to about 9,000 fighters, the government says, half its strength of a decade ago when it regularly overran military outposts.
Padilla said 30 of the rebels who surrendered in the past year had more than 20 years each in the FARC. "The FARC subsists at the moment because it still has money from drug-trafficking and also because of (its) hostages," Padilla said in an interview. "If the hostages didn't exist, nobody would be interested in the FARC."

Many of the die-hard combatants who accept amnesty offers have an added incentive for surrendering: a US$100 million government fund provides cash rewards to those who betray their commanders, with more than US$5 million being paid out to date.

As the FARC hunkers down, rebels are increasingly inflicting casualties with land mines and sniper attacks. Nearly half the 471 soldiers and police it killed last year were land-mine victims, the military says. Venezuela's President Chavez, whom the FARC reportedly holds in ideological esteem, called on the FARC to end its rebellion and release the hostages. "If I were a guerrilla, I would not kidnap anyone," he said in his first statement immediately after the liberation. He said he and his staff were overjoyed by the news. "Congratulations to Colombia, and I hope that not a drop more of blood will be spilled."

The FARC, Chavez said, "should make a greater effort for peace...from my point of view, the time for rifles has already passed. One hopes that the time for rifles will not return, that we are not obligated to return to those times."

At her July 2 news conference, Betancourt was asked about the FARC's future. She said, "I don't want to answer that question from an emotional perspective, because this is such a big blow to the FARC that it would be easy to say that the FARC is destroyed. I simply want to give you testimony of what I lived through. For the past year, it has been hard for supplies to arrive. We have had little to eat, very little variety in the food, no fruit, no greens. That's a signal that the logistics could be going through difficulty."

Betancourt urged an end to the Colombian government's "vocabulary of hate" against her former captors. While praising Uribe’s work toward her release, she said it was time to end "extremist" language. In an interview for French radio, she said, "I think we have reached a point where we must change this radical, extremist vocabulary of hate, of very strong words that intimately wound the human being."

Betancourt urged the government to take a more conciliatory tone toward the FARC to achieve further hostage releases. "The FARC has taken a huge blow, it could probably want some kind of revenge or do something to regain a certain prestige, so I think it is best to be careful."

-- End --