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Colombia Under Fire for Using Red Cross, Media Symbols in Hostage Rescue

by LADB Staff

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Video footage showing covert Colombian military members using logos belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and independent media groups from neighboring countries led those groups to criticize the Colombian military and their commander in chief, President Alvaro Uribe.

The misuse of the emblems occurred during the rescue operation that liberated 15 high-profile hostages held by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) on July 2 (see NotiSur, 2008-07-25). When the video showing Colombian operatives wearing the emblems emerged, the ICRC called the act a violation of the Geneva Conventions and said it had the potential to endanger Red Cross workers in Colombia.

Geneva Conventions violated

On Aug. 6 the ICRC said the deliberate use of its humanitarian emblem during the covert military mission broke international humanitarian law. The newly-released video footage of the operation contradicted an earlier claim by the Colombian government that the emblem was a last-minute addition to the ruse called Operacion Jaque (Operation Check), a reference to the chess term.

The Colombian officers posed as members of a fictitious humanitarian organization and airlifted the hostages out of the FARC's control, pretending to be transferring them to another FARC command. "It seems to be a deliberate improper use of the emblem," said Anna Schaaf, an ICRC spokesperson. Use of the Red Cross symbol in a military operation violates the first Geneva Convention because it could damage the relief group's neutrality in conflicts, endangering medical personnel on the battlefield who are using the red cross for protection.

The ICRC said that the use of the Red Cross, Red Crescent, and Red Crystal symbols is governed by the Geneva Conventions and their protocols, and the symbols may not be used by organizations or persons not entitled to do so under international humanitarian law. "Complete and total respect for the Red Cross emblem is essential if the ICRC is to be able to bring assistance and protection to the people worst affected by armed conflicts and other situations of violence," said an ICRC statement.

In the July 2 rescue, a team of Colombian military intelligence agents posing as members of a fake international humanitarian group the International Humanitarian Mission airlifted the hostages to safety, including Ingrid Betancourt, a former Colombian presidential candidate, and three US military contractors.

After footage showing one member wearing the Red Cross emblem surfaced, President Uribe apologized to the Red Cross for the incident but described it as an unauthorized error by a nervous
soldier. Cesar Mauricio Velasquez, President Uribe's press secretary, said he could not immediately comment on the new report.

ICRC chief spokesperson Florian Westphal said at the time that the Geneva-based relief group accepted Uribe's explanation. "The situation is different for us now," said Schaaf. She said it was now up to the Colombian government to take action against those responsible for misusing the symbol. The video, leaked to local television channel RCN-TV, revealed officers used the Red Cross symbol from the start of the mission. "What we want to say to the government is that this violation cannot be repeated," ICRC representative Christophe Beney told reporters. "All over the world where the ICRC works, unfortunately, there are daily violations of international humanitarian rights."

Beney said the incident was over and would not impede Red Cross work in Colombia, where it carries out humanitarian relief and programs linked to the country's government-rebel conflict, such as aiding victims displaced by the violence. At an Aug 14 press conference, Colombia Red Cross director Fernando Cardenas said a rebel group, which he did not identify by name, requested that the group "make public its position before we continue visiting these sites. They have asked us to clarify our position to create full transparency."

Colombian Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez maintained that the government was not informed of the use of the symbols and that the situation dealt with the "decision of an officer who ignored orders from his superiors." Bermudez stressed that the Colombian government had "nothing but appreciation" for what the ICRC has done in the effort to bring peace to the country.

Vice President Francisco Santos denied that the use of the symbol constituted a war crime, because "no one was killed or injured" in the rescue operation, which also resulted in the arrest of two guerrillas. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos, a cousin to the vice president, said the controversy "should not tarnish the results of the operation...which we are all still celebrating."

The day of the ICRC press conference, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Asamblea Permanente de la Sociedad Civil por la Paz conducted a forum of international and domestic experts on the inappropriate use of humanitarian groups' badges. At the forum were Javier Hernandez Valencia, representative of the Office of UN High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCHR), Colombian professors Alejandro Ramelli, Miguel Angel Herrera, and Gustavo Salazar, ICRC delegates, and the Colombian Red Cross.

The participants agreed that the misuse could undermine confidence in humanitarian agencies' operations and that the July 2 incident had a major international impact. After a meeting between Bermudez and Beney on Aug. 19, Beney said the "issue has been surpassed." Colombian troops impersonated TeleSUR, Ecuavisa journalists The Colombian military not only misused humanitarian emblems, they also impersonated media workers.

**Media symbols also misused**

The video obtained by RCN showed that several soldiers participating in Operacion Jaque wore clothes with the ICRC emblem, while others used the emblems of TeleSUR, a television channel
based in Venezuela, and Ecuavisa, one of Ecuador's major television networks. The soldiers apparently sought to win the rebels' confidence with the disguises.

The soldiers wearing the media symbols were pretending to be part of a camera crew. TeleSUR officials and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez whose government founded and, jointly with several other regional governments, funds the network (see NotiSur, 2005-08-12) criticized the use of media symbols as undermining the efforts of journalists working in Colombia. Journalists groups like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the Venezuela-based Movimiento Periodismo Necesario (MPN) also criticized the impersonation of journalists.

A CPJ letter to Defense Minister Santos said, "The impersonation of journalists increases the risks for all journalists, particularly for provincial reporters who cover the five-decade-old civil conflict in regions controlled by illegal armed groups. In rural areas, journalists are frequently threatened by guerrillas and paramilitaries and pressured by military and civilian authorities, CPJ research shows....By posing as journalists, security forces undermine the role of the free press and bring mistrust to the profession, ultimately damaging the public good."

**Uribe government investigates leaker**

Early on in the scandal, Uribe's government focused more on the violation of military omerta rather than violations of Geneva Conventions or the integrity of the media. "It is a serious matter that members of the armed forces clandestinely leaked news without coordination with their superiors," said an Aug. 5 presidential communique issued after RCN TV broadcast the video.

The Defense Ministry had earlier released three and a half minutes of heavily edited images on the successful intelligence operation in which only one drop of blood was shed the one that spattered former senator Betancourt, the highest-profile hostage, when Alexander Farfan, a guerrilla whose nom de guerre is Enrique Gafas, was hit near her in the helicopter that rescued the hostages. In his statement, Uribe indirectly confirmed that the Defense Ministry had not provided the video to RCN TV, a doubt that had circulated among the media since the video was aired on the evening of Aug. 4 in Bogota.

Although RCN news director Clara Elvira Ospina did not clarify whether the station paid the US$60,000 being asked for the 58-minute recording, the press had information that a member of the military was offering the video for US$30,000, while an intermediary was asking for a similar amount. The president had to publicly apologize to the ICRC when CNN journalist Karl Penhaul reported on July 16 that a "confidential military source" had tried to sell him a video and three photos that clearly showed the Red Cross emblem being used. The source said the photos were taken before the mission began. "CNN declined to buy the material at the price being asked; it was therefore unable to verify the authenticity of the images," Penhaul's article stated.

After the CNN report came out in mid-July, Uribe said he had ordered an internal investigation on the use of the Red Cross symbol. According to Uribe, an officer "said that when the helicopter was about to land, he saw so many guerrillas that he got terribly nervous, and fearing for his life, he pulled a piece of cloth with the Red Cross emblem out of his pocket and put it over his vest."
The president added that the officer would not face sanctions and that he himself assumed complete responsibility. But the video showed the officers on the morning of July 2 at a farm in southern Colombia, disguised as members of the supposed humanitarian mission. As they posed for the camera before the helicopters took off for the jungle pickup of the hostages at 11:59, one of them can be seen wearing a bib with the Red Cross symbol.

Defense Minister Santos announced that the decision to decorate the members of the mission with the Cruz de Boyaca, Colombia's highest honor, had been reversed. The two helicopters, which had been painted white, did not carry the Red Cross symbol. Instead, they bore a logo invented for the operation, with the words International Humanitarian Mission. The helicopters also carried prominently in several places the "no-weapons" symbol an automatic rifle in a red circle with a bar through the middle used by all international humanitarian missions.

Toward the end of the tape, the members of the rescue team can be seen burning the emblems used in the mission, while one of them can be heard to quip "burning the evidence." Two women formed part of the team, not just one "disguised as a nurse," as Army chief Mario Montoya had reported. The FARC rebel known as Cesar said one of the women was wearing a FARC uniform. He also said the Red Cross symbol and the apparent presence of reporters helped convince him and his fellow guerrillas, according to his lawyer Rodolfo Rios.

**Evidence of US involvement**

Inter Press Service reporter Constanza Viera said the video clearly showed that at least one US military cargo plane was involved in the rescue operation. The broadcast by RCN, a station close to the government, also showed that the military helmets used by the intelligence team that carried out the rescue mission, which had been painted red and white, were carrying microphones, reportedly connected to the Defense Ministry and the US cargo plane.

Thus, the Colombian military forces and the US Army Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) directly received coded messages from the officers taking part in the operation. "Fuel OK" meant that everything was going as planned, and "Takeoff OK" meant that the helicopter was taking off with the hostages. The Colombian government had not yet acknowledged the US Southern Command's active participation in planning and implementing the mission, although Colombian generals who said they commanded the operation admitted that there was a "button" installed by the US in the helicopters. The button was to be pushed if the guerrilla unit guarding the hostages did not fall for the ruse, which would have activated an all-out military attack by the Colombian Air Force.

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