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## Released Colombian Captives Promote Negotiations with FARC

by LADB Staff

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The decision in early February of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) to free two politicians and four police and soldiers they had been holding for several years set off a debate in the country. While the released captives, humanitarian organizations, and some leaders and members of the media argue for initiating negotiations on the release of all those being held by the FARC, the government of President Alvaro Uribe insists that no dialogue with the guerrillas is possible. Moreover, he recently upped the ante for a military option, sending hundreds of additional soldiers to the rebel-controlled jungle areas.

The government said that the good health and good spirits of the former captives, and above all their public support for negotiations and their attitude toward their former captors, was the result of the psychological condition known as Stockholm Syndrome.

At the same time, Uribe was confronted by human rights activists and some journalists whom he accused of forming "a very skillful intellectual bloc that, to defend the FARC, turns to their 'fairy tale' of peace." Meanwhile, as the debate intensified, the influential magazine *Semana* reported that the presidential intelligence service was spying on judges, legislators, military personnel, journalists, and political and social leaders for the purpose of selling information to paramilitary commandos and drug traffickers.

Against this backdrop, the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS) special rapporteurs for freedom of expression accused the Uribe government of acting "foolishly and in haste," and diplomatic sources quoted by AFP said that "President Uribe's excessive attitudes could result in the cancellation of the large aid packages with which the US and British governments help Colombia fight the guerrillas and drug traffickers."

### *Released captives want negotiations*

Immediately after their release, Alan Jara, former governor of the department of Meta, and former deputy Sigifredo Lopez gave extensive interviews to media from around the world and spoke at numerous public events. A story in the Bogota daily *El Espectador* said, "We've never seen anybody who was kidnapped come out of the jungle as euphoric as Jara and Lopez. We saw them laughing and smiling, in jovial spirits, and walking briskly, in the midst of their difficult situation. The TV cameras showed an image that was even cool. Most of the public has been left with the sensation that they brought a script that had them speaking too much."

The story concluded, "A certain indulgence toward their captors reminds one of Stockholm Syndrome." That was the second public reference to the psychological disorder produced when, during captivity, kidnapping victims form bonds and develop a certain complicity with their captors in a strange reversal of values in which they defend their jailers' positions.

The first reference was made by government officials, according to Jorge Enrique Botero, reporter for the Mexican daily *La Jornada*. Botero said the officials told the press, "Alan Jara is suffering from a type of Stockholm Syndrome, making it advisable that you not interview him for now and wait until his overly high spirits are lower." The same observations made about Jara, Lopez, and the four police and military had been insinuated in prior releases of FARC prisoners, but in those cases "a more respectful attitude was taken toward those who returned from the nightmare," wrote Leon Valencia in the Bogota daily *El Tiempo*.

Valencia is a former guerrilla who, after showing remorse, took advantage of a government program and went back to practicing journalism. Valencia and other analysts with similar impressions were referring to former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who was rumored to be near death but, barely freed, showed signs of an exceptional state of physical and psychological health. "She spent entire days giving national and international interviews, proposing ways to achieve peace, traveling, maintaining political dialogues, giving opinions regarding the government and the armed struggle, regarding the present and the future of Colombia and Latin America, and even published a book and analyzed various proposals for doing a film script," reported *El Espectador*.

Another case is that of Clara Rojas, Betancourt's running mate in the presidential campaign. While in captivity, she gave birth to a son who was conceived in a consensual relationship with one of the guerrillas. And there are former parliamentarians Gloria Polanco, Jorge Gechem, and Eladio Perez, who, as they were released, exchanged bouquets of flowers with their former captors. And policeman Alexis Torres, in the airport where he returned to freedom, broke through the security cordon to give white flowers and a warm embrace to Sen. Piedad Cordoba, who had participated in negotiations with the FARC and has worked tirelessly to advocate dialogue.

Valencia said, "It is an abuse and a disgrace to attribute Stockholm Syndrome to them just because they do not repeat the official line word for word."

The *El Tiempo* reporter wrote, "After getting some distance from their abductors, the former captives started telling other things that they saw during their long and eventful ordeal. They dared to criticize the government's position against a humanitarian exchange or insisted that it is necessary to negotiate the release of those who remain in captivity. They tell us that the FARC are alive and that they continue recruiting a large number of campesino youth. This angers the government and its supporters, and it resorts to branding those who feel that way as guerrilla accomplices. It is incapable of maintaining even a modicum of respect for these people who have been submitted to such a painful experience. This stigmatizing of the victims is totally excessive, when the government and the entire country should celebrate the pacifist vocation and spirit of reconciliation of most of the people who come out of the painful experience of kidnapping."

Far from the sentiments expressed by the released captives and a good part of society and the press, at the opposite extreme, Uribe offers another view. Although he thanked Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva for providing logistical support for the release of the captives, during a visit to Brazil he refused to consider a dialogue facilitated by that country. He attacked *Colombianos para la Paz*, headed by Piedad Cordoba, the only negotiator the guerrillas have accepted, accusing it of

forming "an intellectual bloc that assumes the FARC discourse, talking to us about peace when they only produce bloodshed." He then accused journalist Hollman Morris, Bogota correspondent for Radio France Internationale and Al Jazeera and producer of Contravia, one of the most watched programs on teleSUR, of being "the publicist for terrorism" or a "propagandist for violence."

That was Feb. 9. Two days later, on Feb. 11, Morris and dozens of activists with Colombianos para la Paz received death threats, which, in Colombia, frequently end up turning into a painful reality.

Colombia has the highest number of assassinated journalists in South America; in 2008, the number exceeded 100. The UN and OAS special rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank la Rue and Catalina Botero, respectively, said in a joint communique, "It is surprising how quickly the president cast doubt, with insulting adjectives, on the professionalism of Morris, whose independence we deeply respect."

They said that, after Uribe's statements, Morris received threatening phone calls. The journalist has had similar threats before; since 2000, he has been a beneficiary of precautionary measures granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), part of the OAS.

### *Another scandal for the Uribe government*

While the debate continues its course and seems far from dying down, the government received a decided blow on Feb. 20 when the magazine *Semana* denounced and provided proof of telephone and electronic espionage by the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), the intelligence service that reports directly to President Uribe.

Its targets included judges, politicians, generals, prosecutors, and even some members of the administration, along with the directors of Cadena Radial Colombiana, *Semana*, Radio W, the radio network Noticias Uno, and Ramiro Bejarano, columnist for *El Espectador* who has criticized the government's humanitarian policy.

Uribe responded quickly, prohibiting the DAS from intercepting telephone calls or email communications, but he did not disband the agency as many had expected. Diplomatic sources quoted by AFP said they were "deeply upset because the interception equipment donated by the US and Britain is being used for criminal activities," and that "could mean the end of military aid from both countries."

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