



USIPeace Briefing

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Colombia's Crossroads: *The FARC and the Future of the Hostages*

By Virginia M. Bouvier

Synopsis

This *USIPeace Briefing* discusses the condition of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), their hostages and the potential direction of this situation. The briefing stresses insights that key figures in the issue raised in recent visits to Washington, DC.

Context

In the wake of the death of Manuel Marulanda Vélez, co-founder of the FARC, and his succession by Antonio Cano, longtime FARC political wing leader, Colombia stands at a crossroads. FARC spokespersons have renewed their vows to carry on their deceased leader's fight and Cano may seek short-term military victories to bolster his internal support. However, a window of opportunity for peace with the world's oldest guerrilla fighting force may simultaneously be opening.

Cano is one of the FARC's chief ideologues, so his appointment seems to signal that a political approach to the conflict has gained the upper hand. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who played a key role in recent hostage negotiations with the FARC, appealed publicly to the FARC to end its forty-year struggle, noting that "an armed guerilla movement is out of place" in Latin America, where conditions today favor a peace process. Chávez urged the new FARC leader to release all hostages (including three from the U.S.) in a "great humanitarian gesture."¹ Colombian government officials, including former hostage and current Foreign Minister Fernando Araújo, echoed this call. Chávez has suggested that releasing the hostages could provide the necessary condition to initiate peace talks, supported by a group of friendly nations.²

The fate of the FARC hostages will indicate whether Colombia is likely to head down a path toward peace or to witness a resurgence of violence. Following Marulanda's death, Colombian government officials announced that rebels had inquired whether they might be given freedom if they defected with one or more of the hostages in tow, and offered a reward of up to \$100 million and freedom in France to any rebels that do so. No one has yet come forward in response.

Advocates for a humanitarian accord—which would determine the conditions under which the FARC would release hostages in exchange for the government releasing some 500 FARC

prisoners—have underscored the urgency of securing an agreement to end kidnapping as a tool of war. Beyond the humanitarian aspects of such an accord, many see it as a confidence-building measure.

USIP Event

In May 2008, USIP and the Center for International Policy sponsored the visit to Washington of Colombian Senator Luis Eladio Pérez, one of six Colombians released unilaterally by the FARC earlier this year following intensive diplomatic and international efforts. Pérez, former head of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Colombian Senate, was kidnapped in June 2001. Some of his “six year, eight month, 17 day, and nine hour” captivity in various jungle outposts was spent with three U.S. defense contractors who have been held hostage since 2003, and with Ingrid Betancourt, a former presidential candidate with dual French and Colombian citizenship who was kidnapped while campaigning in 2002. In Washington, Pérez met privately with members of Congress and officials of the National Security Council, Department of State, Pentagon, the Colombian Embassy and the *Washington Post* editorial board.³ Pérez was [joined at USIP](#), Capitol Hill, and the National Press Club by panelists including:

- French Ambassador Pierre Vimont and Deputy Chief of Mission Francois Rivasseau
- Venezuelan Deputy Chief of Mission Angelo Rivero Santos
- Members of Congress Jim McGovern (MA) and William Delahunt (MA)
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) representative Margarita Studemeister
- Colombian journalist Jorge Enrique Botero
- Center for International Policy (CIP) Colombia program director Adam Isacson
- USIP Colombia conflict team leader Virginia M. Bouvier

Angela and Carolina Pérez (wife and daughter of Luis Eladio, respectively) and Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Álvarez also spoke at these events. This briefing summarizes key points of the discussion, which focused on:

- The status of the remaining hostages;
- Initiatives for their release;
- The role of the international community;
- Military rescue operations;
- Obstacles, opportunities, and prospects for a humanitarian accord.

Status of the Hostages

The FARC continue to hold hostage seven civilians and thirty-three Colombian military and police officials. Of the former, three—Thomas Howes, Keith Stansell and Marc Gonçalves—are U.S. citizens. The plane of these civilian defense contractors crashed in the jungles of southern Colombia in February 2003. The other civilian hostages include Ingrid Betancourt, former Congressman Oscar Lizcano, former Meta Governor Alan Jara and Valle del Cauca legislator Sigifredo López. These political hostages, some of whom have been held for more than ten years, are known as the “exchangeable ones.”

In addition to these political hostages, the FARC hold an estimated 700 “economic” hostages (the actual number is unknown) for ransom. Kidnappings, extortion, and drug trafficking have

provided steady income to all of the illegal armed actors in Colombia—the FARC, paramilitary groups, and the National Liberation Army (ELN, the country’s second largest guerrilla group). According to the Colombian Ministry of Defense, at their height in 2000, kidnappings totaled 3,572, a number that dwindled to 521 by 2007.⁴ The release of these mostly short-term captives usually occurs following quiet ransom payment.

In recent months, there have been some positive developments with regard to the political hostages. In January 2008, the FARC unilaterally released Clara Rojas (Ingrid Betancourt’s running mate) and former Congresswoman Consuelo González de Perdomo. In late February, they released four former Colombian legislators who had been held for more than six years — Senator Pérez, Jorge Eduardo Gechem Turbay, Gloria Polanco, and Orlando Beltrán.

At the USIP event, Pérez and the other panelists analyzed the factors that contributed to these recent releases.

Mounting Pressures for a Humanitarian Accord

Family members of the hostages have traveled the globe to garner support for a humanitarian accord. [Recent visitors to USIP](#) included Marleny Orjuela, the head of ASFAMIPAZ (the association of relatives of army and police officers being held hostage); Juan Sebastián Lozada, son of Gloria Polanco de Lozada; Carolina Pérez, daughter of Luis Eladio Pérez; Angela Giraldo, sister of Francisco Giraldo (Valle del Cauca departmental legislator kidnapped in 2002); and Gustavo Moncayo, the father of Pablo Emilio Moncayo, an army corporal captured by the FARC and held since 1997.

In June 2007, the FARC’s brutal killing of 11 of the 12 Valle del Cauca legislators being held, including Angela’s brother, and Moncayo’s 46-day, 700-mile [pilgrimage from his hometown in southwestern Colombia to Bogotá](#) helped awaken the consciousness of Colombians to the plight of the hostages. All of these visitors have provided compelling testimony about:

- The need for a humanitarian accord;
- The horrifying conditions in which their loved ones are held;
- The dangers that military rescue operations present for the hostages.

Massive mobilizations in Colombia and abroad in February and March 2008, facilitation efforts by Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba, and intensive high-level diplomatic engagement by the Venezuelan and French governments built on the efforts of family members and contributed to a shift in the political climate that resulted in the recent releases.

Córdoba-Chávez Initiative

Panelists discussed the role of the political and diplomatic community in securing the recent hostage releases. Following the killing of the legislators in June, public demands for government action heightened, and Colombian President Álvaro Uribe authorized Senator Piedad Córdoba to facilitate a humanitarian accord and to open contact with FARC leaders. In August 2007, [Córdoba secured Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s appointment as an official mediator for a humanitarian accord](#). Chávez and Córdoba were accepted as interlocutors by both the Colombian government and the FARC, and in the following months they engaged in a flurry of activity and

high-level meetings that injected new hope and urgency into the discussions. Córdoba's visit to two FARC leaders held in U.S. detention opened new territory for compromise when the detained leaders assured her that they would opt out of a prisoner exchange if their inclusion would block a humanitarian accord from being reached.

As momentum gathered, however, in late November 2007, Uribe suspended the process and dismissed Chávez after the Venezuelan president [initiated unauthorized contact with the Colombian Army chief](#).

Córdoba and Chávez's efforts, facilitated by the ICRC, nonetheless persisted into 2008 with a mandate from the hostages' relatives to pursue a humanitarian accord that would guarantee the release of the remaining hostages. They were instrumental in securing the unilateral release of the six hostages earlier this year, and have continued to encourage friendly nations in Latin America and Europe to join their efforts.

Role of the ICRC

Taking civilian hostages in armed conflict is prohibited under international humanitarian law. ICRC activities seek to encourage the parties to act in keeping with these international norms and laws. Such is the case in Colombia, where the ICRC has worked since 1969. Today the ICRC has over 300 staff members there, including a delegation in Bogotá that operates five sub-delegations and six offices throughout the country. Margarita Studemeister discussed the work of the ICRC in promoting international humanitarian law and serving as a "neutral and independent intermediary." Studemeister noted that "the ICRC engages in confidential dialogue with the armed and security forces and with organized armed groups, and regularly facilitates the freeing of hostages."

In 2007 in Colombia, the ICRC facilitated the handover of 24 hostages and the recovery of the bodies of the 11 Valle del Cauca legislators that were killed in captivity. Thus far in 2008, the ICRC has facilitated the handover of six hostages, including Pérez.

French Efforts

Diplomatic initiatives to establish a humanitarian accord preceded and accompanied the recent hostage releases. At the Hill event, Vimont described the evolution of France's efforts since Betancourt's was kidnapped in February 2002. In keeping with its policy of considering it a "moral duty" to use any means to secure the release of citizen hostages, Paris began bilateral discussions with the Colombians, and soon invited Switzerland and Spain to join the search for a political solution.⁵ The Europeans developed a proposal that entailed establishing a demilitarized zone, or *despeje*, of limited scope and duration, with international observation and protection to ensure no further kidnappings, and well-defined terms of reference that limited the goals of negotiation to a humanitarian exchange. The plan was accepted by the Colombian government, rejected by the FARC, then tabled following the explosion of a car bomb at the war college in Bogotá in October 2006. However, the plan offers guidelines and recommendations that could be resuscitated should the political will materialize from either side to pursue a humanitarian accord.

With Sarkozy's May 2007 election, the French commitment to securing the release of Ingrid and the other hostages became a presidential priority. Rivasseau underscored that Franco-Colombian historical ties of friendship, deep French popular support for Betancourt, and presidential determination to secure the release of the hostages mean that the French will stay the course until a political solution is found.

Panelists noted that the FARC have shown themselves to be more politically astute since the recent interventions of Chávez and Córdoba, and suggested that this development be considered in future efforts to secure the release of the remaining hostages. Pérez underscored the FARC's apparent willingness to seek a political solution to the hostage situation.

Since his release, Pérez has worked with President Sarkozy to refine a plan to release the remaining hostages.⁶ The initial phase included the FARC's release of all the remaining civilian hostages and a commitment to cease kidnapping. Uribe would then have authorized the immediate release of the FARC guerrillas who had been accused of war crimes to the French authorities while details of an exchange for the remaining military and police hostages could be worked out. The FARC's agreement to address these requisites of international humanitarian law would have been a first step to:

- Recognizing the organization's status as a belligerent force with a political agenda;
- French efforts to seek the removal of the FARC from the EU terrorist list;
- Granting temporary asylum in French territory (possibly Martinique or French Guyana) for released FARC guerrillas.

The plan also solicited heightened engagement of other Latin American governments and called for French, Venezuelan, and UNESCO assistance to relocate and reintegrate the released FARC prisoners in Venezuela. This plan would address the "immovable mental blocks" to a political solution by obviating the need for a demilitarized zone within Colombia for such negotiations, or the need for released FARC prisoners to forswear their allegiance to the FARC before being released. Some of these elements were apparently agreed to by the FARC.

Were it not for the March 1 killing of Raúl Reyes, FARC's second-in-command, suggested Pérez, the next steps of the plan might have been implemented and Betancourt and the other civilians would be free. For now, the plan has been suspended temporarily. There was hope among the participants that, like the European's earlier proposal, it could still provide guideposts for future discussions.

Impact of International Efforts

Pérez credits French and Venezuelan efforts with striking a blow to the collective "amnesia" regarding the hostages. According to him, not only were these individuals taken hostage by the FARC, but they were also taken hostage by 'el olvido' (the forgetfulness) of Colombian society. Sarkozy's efforts helped raise awareness of the hostages among the Colombians, who participated for the first time in massive demonstrations on behalf of the hostages in February 2008, and pushed the Colombian government to address the issue.

U.S. Role?

Participants believed that the U.S. has a key role to play in advancing a humanitarian accord, especially given the deep economic ties between Washington and Bogotá. Pérez critiqued the U.S. policy of not speaking out publicly on behalf of the American hostages, apparently for fear of raising their value to the hostages. He argued that this approach was based on faulty logic, since the price of the American hostages appears to be fixed directly to the fate of two or three FARC leaders, including Ricardo Palmera (aka “Simón Trinidad”) and Anayibe Rojas Valderama (aka Omaira Rojas Cabrera or “Sonia”), who were extradited to the United States on drug trafficking charges and sentenced to 60 and 17 years, respectively, in federal prison.

Pérez noted that the U.S. approach has left the American hostages—with whom he spent a good part of his captivity—feeling quite abandoned. He noted how important messages of solidarity have been to raise the hostages’ spirits. *Radio Caracol’s* morning program of messages to the hostages, “*Las voces del secuestro*” (“Voices of Captivity”), has been a lifeline for the hostages. He encouraged the Bush administration to speak publicly about the Americans, noting that they did not appear to be on the radar of either President Bush or Secretary Rice on their recent visits to Colombia. Senator Pérez underscored the importance of maintaining a humanitarian and political approach to negotiations with the FARC and he urged the Bush administration not to leave the issue for the next administration given the ill health of many of the hostages.

Military Rescue Operations

As news surfaced in mid-June that Colombian military officials had identified the location of the three American hostages in the southeastern department of Guaviare, the temptation to launch a spectacular military rescue operation will undoubtedly be considered and debated.⁷ Restraint has prevailed thus far. Policymakers would do well to be cautious about such an undertaking, suggested the panelists. Released hostages and their families have cautioned that military rescue operations, however tempting, put the remaining hostages at severe risk. Hostages are kept under intense surveillance by FARC captors who have standing orders to kill the captives if they suspect such operations are unfolding.

Last June, fear that such an operation was under way appears to have led the FARC to kill the 11 Valle del Cauca legislators. A previous army rescue effort in May 2003 resulted in the death of ten hostages—Guillermo Gaviria Correa (ex-governor of Antioquia), Gilberto Echeverri (former minister of defense), and eight other military hostages (Alejandro Ledesma Ortiz, Wagner Tapias Torres, Héctor Lucuara Segura, Francisco Manuel Negrete, Yercinio Navarrete Sánchez, Samuel Ernesto Cote, Mario Alberto Marín and José Gregorio Peña).

Obstacles, Opportunities, and Prospects for a Humanitarian Accord

As one participant noted, “The future looks bleak, but not hopeless.” Though further unilateral releases are not out of the question, the current political climate may not lend itself to short-term humanitarian negotiations. First, the prosecution of dozens of elected officials—many close to Uribe—for illegal ties to the paramilitaries unleashed an institutional crisis that has transfixed Colombia’s political elite and put negotiations with the guerrillas on the back burner.

Second, some time may be needed to build new bridges to the FARC, and the field of potential interlocutors has been shrinking fast. The death of Reyes eliminated the main FARC contact for internationals seeking an agreement for the release of the hostages. While tensions with Ecuador and Venezuela over the legality of the Colombian raid that killed Raúl Reyes were tamped down with the intervention of the Organization of American States, information found on confiscated computer files from Reyes's laptops has fueled charges by the Colombian government of backing for the FARC at the highest levels of the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian governments. Both governments have vociferously denied these charges and called on the OAS to investigate further.⁸ Tensions between the countries remain high and have undermined even further Chávez's ability to serve as an interlocutor for the accord.

Furthermore, a number of Colombian politicians and peace facilitators who have sought dialogue between the FARC and the government have likewise been implicated in guerrilla communications and are now under formal investigation by the Prosecutor-General. They include Córdoba, Colombian politician Álvaro Leyva, Carlos Lozano (editor of the Colombian Communist Party newspaper *Voz*), Democratic Pole Party Congressman Wilson Borja and Congresswoman Gloria Inés Ramírez, U.S. development consultant Jim Jones, and a number of Venezuelan and Ecuadorian officials.⁹ Such a legal strategy effectively may tie the hands of some of those most able to re-establish contact with the FARC for the purposes of a humanitarian accord.

With interlocutors who would be acceptable to both sides sorely lacking, the appearance on the scene of New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who has facilitated the release of U.S. hostages in North Korea, Iraq, and Sudan, may breathe new life into the process. Richardson has taken up the cause of the three Americans in recent months and met with Colombian and Venezuelan authorities to strategize about a way forward.¹⁰

Finally, the notion that the war against the FARC can be won militarily seems to be gaining steam given recent military successes against the FARC, the death of three of its seven-member secretariat, and increased FARC desertions.¹¹ Even if military victory were to be forthcoming (the FARC have stymied fulfillment of this prediction for decades), it would need to be accompanied by some political arrangement that addresses the prevalent social crisis—characterized by poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, and economic inequality—that fostered the rise and consolidation of the FARC. Panelists cautioned that even if the entire FARC leadership were eliminated, the conflict is likely to continue, and the need to pursue broader political solutions would remain.

About the Author:

This *USIPeace Briefing* was written Virginia M. Bouvier, senior program officer in the Grants and Fellowships Program and Colombia team leader with the assistance of Eduardo Abreu, research assistant, at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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¹ Simon Romero, “Chávez Urges Colombian Rebels to End Their Struggle,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2008; “Chávez pide a las FARC liberación incondicional de todos los rehenes,” June 9, 2008, *Reuters*, at www.betancourt.info/indexFr.htm.

² “FARC Should Free Hostages: Chávez,” *Agence France Presse*, June 9, 2008, at www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle.asp?xfile=data/theworld/2008/June/theworld_June454.xml§ion=the world.

³ Jackson Diehl, “Pawns in the Jungles of Colombia,” June 2, 2008, p. A13, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/01/AR2008060101914_pf.html.

⁴ Kevin Whitelaw, “Inside Colombia’s War on Kidnapping,” *U.S. News & World Report*, Feb. 27, 2008, at www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/02/27/inside-colombias-war-on-kidnapping.html.

⁵ Virginia M. Bouvier, “New Hopes for Negotiated Solutions in Colombia,” USIP Working Paper, September 2007, available at www.usip.org/pubs/working_papers/wp4_colombia.pdf.

⁶ María Laura Avignolo, “Audaz plan de Sarcozy para que las FARC liberen a los rehenes,” *Clarín*, at www.clarin.com/diario/2008/03/02/elmundo/i-03215.htm.

⁷ “Colombia localizó campamento de estadounidenses secuestrados,” *Agence France Presse*, June 9, 2008.

⁸ Nelson Bocanegra, “OAS Says to Probe Colombian Rebel Computer Files,” *Reuters*, June 2, 2008, at www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N02321728.htm.

⁹ See analysis and details at Center for International Policy blog, “Promoting Peace, or Breaking the Law?” May 23, 2008, at www.cipcol.org.

¹⁰ Christopher Toothaker, “Chávez Confirms He Will Work for Release of U.S. Hostages,” *The Associated Press*, April 27, 2008.

¹¹ See “The End of Illusion and the Last Guerrilla,” *The Economist*, June 12, 2008, at http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11535679.