

Mounting questions about Colombian hostage operation

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Global Research, July 08, 2008

wsws.org 8 July 2008

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

As right-wing politicians on three continents basked in the reflected glory of an ostensibly brilliant July 2 rescue of hostages held by Colombia's FARC (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia) guerrillas, doubts have surfaced as to the real character of this operation.

The freeing of Ingrid Betancourt, the French-Colombian citizen and former presidential candidate, three US military "contractors" employed by the Northrop Grumman corporation and 11 other hostages has been exploited to refurbish the Bush administration's discredited Latin American policy, to make a hero out of Alvaro Uribe, the Colombian president implicated in drug trafficking and paramilitary massacres, and to boost the sagging popularity of France's right-wing president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

Even Senator John McCain, the Republican Party's presumptive presidential nominee, who staged a visit to Colombia (a fortuitous coincidence?) the day before the hostage release, got in on the act. While in Colombia, he received a briefing from Uribe, enabling him to associate himself with the upcoming operation.

There is virtually nothing to distinguish McCain from his Democratic opponent on the question of Colombia. Senator Barack Obama issued his own statement hailing the operation, calling the FARC a "terrorist organization" and affirming his support for the Colombian government "making no concessions" to the guerrillas. Nonetheless, if Uribe could do any favors politically, it would no doubt be to the Republicans, after six years as the Bush administration's closest ally in Latin America.

What all of these figures sought to exploit was the undoubted public sympathy for Betancourt, a mother of two held in the jungle for six years, and the other hostages. In addition, they cast the Colombian operation as a brilliant intelligence coup—described by some as straight out of a Hollywood movie—in the "global war on terror."

Of course the sympathy generated by government officials and the mass media for Betancourt, not just in Colombia, but in the US, France and throughout Europe, does not extend to many others who have been kidnapped and imprisoned under worse conditions. There is, after all, another place in the Americas where hundreds have been held prisoner for six years, facing torture and brutality after being abducted from their homes. These prisoners, held without charges, have little chance of being similarly rescued, as they are imprisoned by the US military in Guantánamo Bay.

Nor, it should be noted, have the many hundreds of political prisoners languishing in Colombian jails or abducted by the right-wing paramilitary organizations that are intimately tied to the government and the armed forces, received any similar attention. Their social

backgrounds are generally quite dissimilar from that of the French-educated Ingrid Betancourt, the daughter of a former government minister and product of the Colombian oligarchy.

As for the operation itself, the comparison to Hollywood may be unintentionally revealing. According to the official story from the Colombian military, intelligence agents succeeded in infiltrating the guerrilla movement and “duping” FARC leaders into believing that elite commandos disguised in Che Guevara T-shirts and military pilots were aid workers, guerrillas and journalists involved in a plan by FARC itself to transfer the hostages by helicopter to another location.

Praise for the operation included the repeated observation that “not a shot was fired.”

That veteran guerrillas would simply turn over the FARC’s most valuable hostages to unknown individuals arriving in a helicopter strains credulity. What makes this account particularly suspect, however, is the entire record of the Colombian military, which hardly calls to mind operations in which “not a shot is fired.” In fact, it has carried out one of the bloodiest campaigns in the hemisphere over the course of decades, fueled over the last 10 years by some \$5.4 billion in US military aid.

Between 2002 and 2007, human rights groups documented the extrajudicial killing of nearly 1,000 civilians by the country’s military, as well as another 3,500 murders and disappearances carried out by the right-wing paramilitary units—routinely operating with military support. It was in December 2002 that the Colombian government concluded a ceasefire agreement with the paramilitaries, essentially exonerating them for their crimes, which accounted for the bulk of civilian casualties in the country’s protracted civil war. Nonetheless, the assassinations and massacres have continued.

During the same period, the guerrillas—both the FARC and a smaller organization, the ELN—with whom no ceasefire had been concluded, were responsible for barely half as many civilian deaths as the paramilitaries.

Moreover, the Uribe government has shown no interest in effecting a peaceful release of the hostages in the past. Indeed, the last attempt by French negotiators to secure the release of Betancourt and others was disrupted in March, when the Colombian military staged a cross-border raid on a FARC camp in Ecuador, killing the guerrillas’ chief negotiator Raul Reyes, who was apparently targeted in order to block any agreement. Betancourt’s family repeatedly expressed fears that Uribe’s actions would result in her death.

It is this record that lends credibility to accounts circulating in Europe casting doubt on the heroic tale told in Bogota.

Citing a source “close to the events,” Swiss public radio reported that the hostages’ freedom had been bought with a \$20 million ransom, and that the “whole operation afterwards was a set-up.” The political purpose of staging such a performance is clear. Both the Uribe government and the Bush administration have classified FARC as a “terrorist organization” and have insisted that they reject any negotiations with such groups.

According to the report from Switzerland—whose government had together with France and Spain been involved in the hostage negotiations—Washington played the leading role in organizing the deal.

The report added that the arrangement was made by using the captured wife of one of the guerrilla leaders as a go-between. According to this account, she was sent back to the FARC camp and persuaded him to change his allegiance for money.

In France, where Betancourt arrived Friday to a hero's welcome, Dominique Moisi, one of the country's top foreign policy experts, appeared to support this version of events. He told French state television that it was "probable" that money had secured the cooperation of FARC leaders. "They were bought in order to turn them around, like Mafia chiefs," he said.

Meanwhile, Mediaparte, the French news web site founded by the former chief editor of *Le Monde* and other journalists, reported that the rescue was "not an achievement of the Colombian military, but due to the surrender of a group of the FARC members" following "direct negotiations by the Colombian secret services with the guerrilla group that held Betancourt captive." Citing Colombian sources, it reported that Uribe had told a group last May that a surrender of those holding the hostages was being negotiated. Mediaparte added that the Sarkozy government agreed to offer the ex-guerrillas sanctuary in France after their surrender.

The government has access to large amounts of money supplied by Washington to make payoffs to guerrillas for changing sides. This was evident in the slaying last March of FARC leader Ivan Rios, whose bodyguard killed him and then presented his severed right hand to authorities to collect a \$2.5 million US bounty.

Another version, from sources close to the FARC leadership, charged that the Colombian government operation was staged as the FARC itself had reached an agreement with European negotiators and was preparing to release the hostages, either this weekend or next. The purpose of the intervention, according to this account, was to turn the release into a public relations coup for the government, rather than boosting the image of the FARC.

Whatever the precise details of the strange "rescue operation," the release of Betancourt, the US mercenaries and the others, with Uribe and his American allies taking credit, is another indication of the severe crisis of the FARC.

With its political roots in Colombia's Communist Party, the FARC emerged out of the bitter civil war that bled the country from 1948 onward, a period known as "La Violencia" which saw the largest armed struggle over land in the Western Hemisphere since the Mexican revolution.

Formed in 1964, the FARC has always based itself on the Stalinist perspective of subordinating the struggles of the workers and peasants to the "progressive" wing of the national bourgeoisie. It used its armed actions in the countryside—which at its height in the 1990s brought it into control over 40 percent of Colombia's territory—as a means of pressuring the government. Its perspective over the recent period has been to force the government into negotiations, allowing it to follow the well-worn path of other Latin American guerrilla groups by turning itself into a bourgeois political party.

With little support among Colombia's urban workers, the FARC has rested on a layer of the peasantry, increasingly dependent upon taxes collected from coca cultivators in return for protection. Like the bourgeois state, the military and the paramilitary organizations, it has been corrupted by the immense revenues generated by the drug-producing and trafficking industry.

The blows suffered by the FARC over the past period have done nothing to stem the flow of cocaine. According to the UN's World Drug Report, coca cultivation in Colombia rose by 27 percent last year. The defeat of the guerrilla group would merely mean that other state and private actors would collect the revenues currently underwriting their operations.

Incapable of providing any genuine political or social alternative to the rule of Colombia's oligarchy, the guerrilla movement has increasingly been cast by the political establishment as the source, rather than a symptom, of the country's protracted crisis and bloodletting. In the apparent absence of any progressive way out of the impasse, Uribe has gained popular support on the basis of a promise to impose order with a strong hand.

No doubt, the supposed success of the military in this operation will be utilized by Uribe to consolidate his presidential dictatorship and distract from the multiple political crises confronting his government.

The president and his closest supporters are deeply implicated in the so-called *parapolitica* scandal, which has exposed ties between them and the rightist paramilitary organizations responsible for massacres and thousands of killings. At least 33 members of Colombia's Congress are currently under arrest and some 60 more under investigation—nearly all of them Uribe's backers—for such connections. The president himself has been implicated in one of the most savage massacres of the 1990s.

Moreover, the release of the hostages comes little more than a week after the country's high court found that the Colombian president secured a constitutional amendment allowing him to succeed himself in 2006 by bribing members of Congress. The ruling, which resulted in the sentencing of one legislator, has called into question the legitimacy of Uribe's second term. In response, the Colombian president has called for another vote, essentially counting on a popular referendum to overrule a constitutional decision. There are growing suspicions that he will try to parlay this maneuver into a third term.

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