

Hope for Colombian hostages via airwaves

Kidnapping has fallen sharply, but 4,040 people are still held by rebels and criminals.

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BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA – There were 800 kidnappings reported in Colombia last year.

That's 44 percent less than the 1,440 who were snatched in 2004, which, in turn, was 32 percent fewer than the 2,122 abducted in 2003. President Álvaro Uribe's office, which has made combating the scourge a priority (and gives out these statistics), is justifiably proud.

But for Claudia Cabellero, the upbeat statistics are of little comfort. She wants her husband Francisco home. She has not seen him since he was kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) four years ago.

"I pray to the Virgin to give you patience and hope," she says, addressing him on 'Voices of the Kidnapped,' a unique weekly call-in radio program here.

She is unsure where her husband is, or whether he is even still alive. But she calls in almost every week, anyway, just in case. "God willing you can hear me, my love," she says.

Newly reelected President Uribe - whose own father was killed by the FARC during a botched kidnapping in the 1980s - has made security a cornerstone of his administration. The success of Uribe's hard-hitting campaign against leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries can be measured, in part, by the fact that Colombia has finally shed its notoriety as the kidnap capital of the world. (That distinction now belongs to Mexico, where there were more than 3,000 kidnappings last year, according to the US State Department.)

But, while ameliorated, neither the civil war, nor the kidnappings here, are over. There are 4,040 hostages still being held by the FARC and other rebel groups, according to País Libre, a support group for kidnap victims. Among the hostages are 23 politicians, 33 members of the military and police, and three US military contractors. But most of those in captivity are ordinary citizens - who were at the wrong roadblock at the wrong time.

Colombian insurgents, often working with criminal gangs, supplement their cocaine earnings with such kidnappings, says Daniel Linsker, a Colombia expert at Control Risks, a London-based private risk consultancy.

Many of these hostages have not been heard from for years. And sometimes it can seem like they are forgotten. "Everyone in Colombia is related to, or knows someone who was kidnapped. But amazingly, we have stopped talking about it," says Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, a professor of political science at Universidad de Los Andes. "Maybe because things have gotten better here ... or because we just want to forget."

"It's self-preservation," says Herbin Hoyos Medina, the radio journalist who created Voices of the Kidnapped. "We are living in a tragedy, and we need to mute the solidarity or we will be too sad." It's also normal for interest to wane as time passes, he adds, "especially if Colombians are trying to focus on the positives, not negatives. Ten years ago, if you were kidnapped, there was a full page in the newspaper. Now, it's four lines," he says.

But, while Mr. Hoyos can understand the change, he won't abandon those in captivity. His four-hour weekly radio program has transmitted over 280,000 messages to kidnapping victims since its launch in 1994, and inspired several similar programs here.

Every Saturday night, at midnight, Hoyos enters the sound booth in Bogotá, puts on his earphones, and opens the phone lines.

The first caller is Maria Consuelo Mesa addressing her son Hector Fabio Arizmendi. "I hope you feel good today, my son," she tells the young man she has not seen in three years. "Have dignity," she urges him. "We will wait for you for as long as it takes."

Across the room, volunteers screen the calls. Families of those in captivity longest get priority to talk, and no one is on for more than two minutes. Callers can say whatever they like, but the philosophy of the program is to remain upbeat - no crying, no despair. "I tell them to write down their messages beforehand and practice a few times, so their voices do not waver," says Hoyos.

"Speak to Daddy," Erika Patricia Serna Cadavid, a caller from Cali, cajoles her son. The child was only days old in April 2002 when his father Carlos Barragan was kidnapped. "I made a puppet in school today," the boy says, and then mumbles. "Bye, Dad. Speak to you next week."

Many hostages released over the years - including Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos - say they were allowed to listen to the radio while being held.

"Colombian kidnappers are much more developed than, say, Mexican ones. In most cases, it's a businesslike investment," says Control Risk's Linsker. "Colombian kidnappers want to protect their investment, and health is a serious issue. That might be why they let them listen to radio."

"The captors know they need to give victims hope, otherwise, they will die, which is no good," says Hoyos. Even if the hostages cannot hear the voices reaching out to them, the program is still valuable for the families themselves, he contends.

"This is for all of you kidnap victims out there... my sons," says Emperatriz de Guevara, one of the last callers of the night. Her son was kidnapped four years ago and died in captivity last year. But she still calls from time to time. "Good morning," she says, sending her voice out into the faraway jungles. "I just want you all to know, we are waiting for you."