

3 American hostages in Colombia are focus of U.S. trial

The Miami Herald
Oct. 17, 2006

WASHINGTON - The government said Monday that a top Latin American rebel leader plotted to keep three Americans hostage and use them as political bargaining chips after their plane crashed in Colombia.

But the defense portrayed Ricardo Palmera as a tangential sympathizer of the leftist FARC group who unfairly got caught in the middle after trying to negotiate a deal between guerrilla fighters and the U.S.-backed Colombian government.

"This man had nothing to do with the capture of the three Americans," said Palmera attorney Robert Tucker. "He became the pawn in the power play."

Justice Department attorney John Crabb opened his case by arguing that Palmera -- better known by his *nom de guerre* Simón Trinidad -- was guilty on charges of hostage-taking, conspiracy and providing material support to terrorists.

"We'll trade you hostages -- including three Americans -- for all FARC prisoners in jail. That was Simon Trinidad's offer," Crabb said.

"He admitted he was a member of FARC, he admitted FARC takes hostages," he said. "That man, Simón Trinidad, tried to use them as get out of jail cards for FARC."

Tucker countered that there was little evidence tying Palmera directly to the hostage-taking after the plane carrying the U.S. military contractors encountered engine trouble and crashed in February 2003.

"There's no evidence he's ever seen them," Tucker said. "There's no evidence he ever made any demand or talked to anybody."

A panel of 15 jurors and alternates listened intently. In the courtroom audience sat family members of the three American hostages.

The trial is expected to last five to six weeks.