

Colombia accuses FARC in hostage deaths

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

Colombia's president accused guerrillas of murdering 11 state lawmakers in cold blood, making a live television broadcast Thursday to dispute a rebel claim that the hostages died in crossfire during a military attack.

President Alvaro Uribe denied a rescue attempt was made for the hostages. He said there were no such military operations in areas where the hostages are thought to have been held on June 18, the date that the FARC rebel movement said the attack occurred.

The news highlighted the precarious state of more than 3,000 people being held by various Colombian armed factions, including three American defense contractors seized four years ago by FARC, the Western Hemisphere's oldest and most potent insurgency.

"The FARC wants to blame these deaths on the armed forces," said Uribe, whose father was killed by the rebel group two decades ago. "The FARC wants to hide this crime against humanity that it committed."

The FARC statement, e-mailed to The Associated Press and other news organizations, said 11 of 12 legislators abducted five years ago were killed during shooting set off when an "unidentified military group" attacked a rebel camp. It said the other lawmaker, Sigifredo Lopez, was not there.

There was no way to independently confirm the claim, but the announcement further dimmed hopes for a prisoner swap with the leftist rebels.

Earlier this month Uribe agreed to free the highest-ranking FARC rebel held in prison along with 150 other FARC guerrillas in a "gesture of good faith." The group rejected that, demanding instead the temporary demilitarization of a zone near Cali for a complete swap of all FARC prisoners for the hostages. Uribe said no.

"I'm totally lost. We don't know what we're going to do," a sobbing Fabiola Perdomo, wife of one of the lawmakers reported dead, said in a telephone interview.

Jo Rosano, mother of kidnapped American contractor Marc Gonsalves, expressed exasperation with Uribe.

"I don't trust that man one bit," she told AP by telephone from Connecticut. "If we're close to any type of humanitarian exchange, it's sabotaged."

The State Department condemned the rebels. "The people that are responsible for the deaths of these individuals are those who took them hostage," spokesman Tom Casey said in Washington.

Although the deaths remained unconfirmed, Colombians turned somber as talk shifted from whether the deputies were actually killed to how the bodies would be recovered.

Tearful listeners phoned radio stations, offering solidarity with the hostages' families. TV networks broadcast video of the April 2002 daylight raid in which guerrillas dressed as soldiers seized the lawmakers at the Valle del Cauca state assembly building in Cali.

"To the families of the dead deputies, we offer our deepest condolences," the e-mailed FARC statement said. "We will do all in our power to help them recover the remains as soon as possible."

FARC said there had been an increase in military operations in the zone where the hostages were held, but gave no indication where that was. "It was always our priority to keep them safe in the middle of continual rescue missions," the statement said.

The 12 deputies are among 60 prominent people held by FARC, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, whose case has been widely followed in France, where she also is a citizen.

FARC, a 43-year-old largely peasant army that demands a more equitable distribution of Colombia's wealth, had previously sought to exchange the lawmakers for all its imprisoned fighters.

Families of the 12 hostages have pressured the government for a prisoner swap and criticized the idea of a military rescue, fearing their loved ones would be killed.

In 2003, an attempted rescue of other hostages ended in bloodshed. Hearing approaching military helicopters, FARC rebels killed 10 hostages, including a former defense minister and governor.

Anger among anti-kidnapping campaigners fell on both FARC and the government for failing to reach an agreement.

"It has been five years of struggles, hopes, strength and patience on the part of the families of the deputies, but the government and the FARC have responded with laziness and a lack of humanity," said the Pais Libre foundation, which assists families of kidnap victims.