

American abducted in Colombia doing well

The Miami Herald
Jul. 10, 2007

BOGOTA, Colombia --

The mother of a kidnapped U.S. contractor in Colombia said her son has made friends with his captors, learned to speak Spanish and is generally holding up well after more than four years as a hostage.

Yet Jo Rosano was also told that the camp where her son Marc Gonsalves is being held is rigged with explosives to prevent any attempted military rescue.

Rosano met Friday with a Colombian policeman who shared some time in the same rebel camp with Gonsalves.

Before his escape in April, Jhon Pinchao endured nearly nine years as a hostage of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or the FARC, the nation's largest rebel group.

"He enlightened me on their routine," said Rosano in a telephone interview with The Associated Press, describing her meeting with Pinchao in Florida. "My son is making the best of his situation, and that helped me to hear, because I feared he may be moping around."

Rosano was encouraged by news that Gonsalves has established a rapport with hostages and guards.

"He tells stories to the other hostages and the guerrillas about his childhood which makes them all laugh," she said. "He's become friends with one of the guards, and apparently Marc plays pranks on him all the time."

Pinchao, whom President Alvaro Uribe has designated "ambassador for the kidnapped," said he shared the same camp as Gonsalves for a "few months," but Rosano was not sure when.

Gonsalves and two fellow U.S. contractors for Northrop Grumman Corp. were on a surveillance mission over Caqueta, a rebel stronghold and cocaine-producing region in Colombia's southern jungle, when their plane crashed on Feb. 13, 2003.

Gonsalves, Tom Howes and Keith Stansell were captured almost immediately. Two other men on the mission, an American and a Colombian, were killed by the rebels. The three surviving hostages have been heard from only once.

The good news for Rosano was tempered by fear: Pinchao told her the rebels had prepared a deadly trap for the hostages and any security forces attempting a military rescue.

"Jhon said that bombs have been placed around the camp and were ready to be set off so in case of a search and rescue the bombs would kill the hostages," Rosano said.

Families of the kidnapped are united in opposing military rescues, fearing the hostages will be cut down in the crossfire. Rosano, like others, is demanding negotiation between the government and the rebels.

On Monday in Washington, extradited Colombian rebel leader Ricardo Palmera was convicted of helping hold the U.S. contractors hostage.

Jurors found Palmera guilty of conspiracy to commit hostage-taking but were still deliberating on whether to convict him of supporting terrorism and three counts of actual hostage-taking.

Rosano said she worried that the conviction would make it harder to win the hostages' release.

The FARC - listed by the State Department as a "foreign terrorist organization" - are demanding the freeing of all their imprisoned comrades, including Palmera and a fellow rebel just sentenced to 16 years in prison, in exchange for releasing around 50 high-value hostages, including the three Americans and former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt.

Rosano was also relieved to hear that physically her son is in good shape, despite contracting Hepatitis A since his abduction.

"The guerrillas treated him and he's OK," said Rosano. "Jhon said that Marc is thin, but has muscle as they are allowed to exercise or read during their free time."

Pinchao also told Rosano that Gonsalves has taken to reading the Bible.

"He's definitely growing spiritually," said Rosano.

Pinchao's quick recovery from nearly nine years in captivity has given Rosano hope for the day her son is freed.

"It really can't be as bad as I feared, to see him so well-adjusted and to look so good."