

Colombian hostage's mom encouraged by Chávez offer to help

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CARACAS --

The mother of Colombian-French politician Ingrid Betancourt, who has been held hostage by Colombian rebels since 2002, said Tuesday she is hopeful Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez can help negotiate her daughter's freedom.

Yolanda Pulecio told The Associated Press she was encouraged by her meeting Monday night with Chávez, who offered to help broker a deal between Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's government and the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

"France has done everything imaginable, but the president [Chávez] has leadership in Latin America," said Pulecio, whose daughter is a former Colombian presidential candidate. "It's very important that many people support us, force things a bit before President Uribe and the guerrillas."

The FARC -- which has been trying to overthrow Colombia's government for more than four decades -- holds hundreds of hostages, including three U.S. defense contractors and Betancourt, who was kidnapped at a rebel roadblock and was last seen publicly in a video statement in 2003.

The rebels say they would free her and others in exchange for the release of imprisoned guerrillas.

Meeting with a group of 16 relatives, Chávez offered "all the help we can give" in negotiating a proposed prisoner exchange. He said he is willing to hold talks with FARC leader Manuel Marulanda or whomever the rebels choose. Chávez also plans to meet Uribe in Colombia on Aug. 31.

"I want to at least feel optimistic because I don't want to lose faith," Pulecio said Tuesday while she and other hostages' relatives toured historical sites in Caracas.

She said she hopes Chávez's mediation will dovetail with efforts by France, Switzerland and the Roman Catholic Church.

"We are all united to see if we finally achieve a dialogue and that through dialogue our loved ones are freed," Pulecio said. "It should not be through military operations and violence."

Chávez on Monday offered Venezuela as a possible site for negotiations toward a prisoner exchange. As a goodwill gesture, said he would pardon many of the 27 Colombians serving prison terms in Venezuela for involvement in an alleged 2004 plot that authorities say included plans to kill Chávez.

While FARC rebels profess some ideological affinity with Chávez, the Venezuelan leader has long denied any links to the group and has insisted on staying out of Colombia's conflict.