

# After a Long Trek Across Colombia, Hostage Advocate Not Ready to Rest

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BOGOTA, Colombia -- Gustavo Moncayo's small-town life of quiet anonymity was marked by daily church services and a two-block walk to the public school where he taught social studies. On special days, he said, he'd play his flute.

That was before he became a household name -- a man who made a 600-mile, Forrest Gump-like walk across much of [Colombia](#), finishing early this month, to draw attention to the plight of the estimated 3,000 people being held hostage in this country. Among those victims is his son, a soldier captured by rebels a decade ago.

The 46-day odyssey by Moncayo generated so much attention that it prompted Colombian [President Álvaro Uribe](#) to meet him in [Bogota](#)'s central square for an impromptu debate. There, with the political theater televised nationwide, the two men argued about an intractable problem that afflicts thousands of Colombian families: how to free civilians and soldiers held hostage by the Marxist guerrillas who have been waging war here since 1964.

Moncayo, 55, of southwestern Narino province, has stayed in the plaza since the debate, sleeping in a big white tent with his family. From there, he ventures off to meet with diplomats, university students, Colombian congressmen and, on Monday in the capital of neighboring [Venezuela](#), President [Hugo Chávez](#). Chávez invited "the professor," as Moncayo is known here, and a dozen other relatives of hostages to [Caracas](#) to discuss ways to resolve the crisis.

In a few weeks, people across Colombia have come to see Moncayo as a folk hero who, through a mix of stubborn determination and unabashed optimism, can make things happen, even if those things have nothing to do with kidnapping. It's a role that Moncayo says he has undertaken reluctantly.

"I managed to awake what no one here has awakened in Colombia," said Moncayo, who has a salt-and-pepper goatee and wears a white T-shirt with the image of his son. "I at no moment when I left home had the intention of becoming an important person."

That the wiry, garrulous father of five has become the hope for so many families underscores the mounting frustrations people here feel with the government's inability to secure the release of the kidnapping victims, most held by the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC. The hostages include policemen and soldiers, politicians, three [U.S. Defense Department](#) contractors and [Ingrid Betancourt](#), a Colombian author with dual French citizenship whose liberation has become a priority for [France's](#) new government.

The rebels have demanded that the Uribe government demilitarize two towns in southwestern Colombia for talks that could lead to an exchange -- jailed rebels for

dozens of civilian prisoners -- a proposal that Moncayo and many other relatives of hostages support.

But Uribe, who was elected on a pledge to fight the rebels without quarter, has rejected the proposal. Speaking in the central square, moments after meeting Moncayo in his tent, Uribe said the rebels would forcibly recruit minors, traffic in drugs and kill opponents -- as the group did when a previous government ceded a huge region for peace talks that disintegrated in 2002.

"I won't hand over one millimeter to the criminals," Uribe said, flanked by his ministers and jabbing his finger in the air.

Chávez, who has had cordial relations with Uribe despite ideological differences, has offered another, surprising proposal aimed at brokering a deal.

He said Venezuelan territory could be used for negotiations and, if talks are successful, for an exchange of rebels and hostages.

"Hopefully we can help," Chávez said this past weekend in a nationally televised speech. "Hopefully we can convince the guerrilla forces of the FARC, and the Colombian government, to find a position to free these people."

This year, perhaps more than any other, the quandary of the hostages has been at the forefront of the national consciousness in Colombia. The escape of two prisoners from captivity -- and their stories of hardship in jungle camps -- captivated the nation. Then in June, the country was shaken when 11 civilian lawmakers held by the FARC were slain under murky circumstances.

In Colombia, where opinion polls show broad public support for the conservative government, Moncayo's brash determination and willingness to criticize the president's policies are seen by some as close to treasonous, even though his son was captured in a ferocious rebel attack on a military base in 1997.

In his column in *El Tiempo*, the country's leading newspaper, Fernando Londoño, a former interior minister, belittled Moncayo's son, Pablo Emilio Moncayo, as an incompetent soldier and accused the father of spreading "Marxist venom through Colombia's veins."

Even some Colombians who are critical of Uribe's tough stance on the hostages have questioned whether Moncayo has added much to the debate. Juan Carlos Lecompte, Ingrid Betancourt's husband, said he believes that Moncayo lost a golden opportunity by scolding Uribe for everything from poverty to the state of the country's schools, then delivering a rambling speech in the plaza.

"I would have liked to have seen Moncayo put Uribe in his place," Lecompte said.

Still, as *El Tiempo* noted in editorials, Moncayo's march drew so much support and news coverage that he has become a "political symbol against the cruelty of kidnapping" that could inspire a sustained movement.

Though surprised by all the attention, Moncayo has not let opportunity pass -- nor has he held back, particularly when he was in the plaza. He said the government's offers to release rebels amounted to empty gestures, because the FARC never agreed to reciprocate by releasing hostages. And he blamed Uribe for being recalcitrant.

"You're not the owner of life," Moncayo said.

Seated one evening in his tent, with a light rain falling outside, Moncayo was as busy as ever, attending to a parade of people who stopped by to ask for his help or blessing. There were farmers seeking government aid and the homeless who wander around the city center. Some passersby simply wanted to have their picture taken with Moncayo.

But the symbolic chains that he wears wherever he goes -- to dramatize the plight of the kidnapped -- underscore why he has come all the way to Bogota. "My life was happy until my son had to go into the service," he explained. "From the moment I heard the news he was kidnapped, I've been crazy with sorrow."

He stresses that it was then, in 1997, that his fight began. He has frequently gone on the radio, urging the FARC to release his son. He has even gone deep into rebel territory to talk with some of the FARC's top commanders.

"I've run around with these chains, up and down and all around, but no one cared," he said. "The only solution was to come to Bogota and knock on doors."