

Efforts to recover slain lawmakers begin

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CALI, Colombia --

The International Committee of the Red Cross said Saturday a mission is under way to recover the bodies of 11 former regional lawmakers killed this summer while held captive by Colombia's largest rebel group.

The Red Cross did not divulge details such as where the mission would go or how long it would take, but said in a statement that former Presidential Candidate Alvaro Leyva will accompany its team to retrieve the remains.

The legislators were kidnapped five years ago from the Valle de Cauca provincial parliament by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. The rebels say they died June 18 in the crossfire when an unidentified group attacked the camp where they were being held, while the government accuses the guerrillas of executing the hostages.

The Red Cross said it "received information from the FARC about the location of the cadavers of the former lawmakers" and that all "the parties concerned" have guaranteed the safety of its recovery team.

Families of the legislators have been waiting for the bodies to be returned since learning of their fate at the end of June.

"These are the final stages," Fabiola Perdomo, the widow of one of the hostages, told Caracol Radio. "It seems we are close to receiving the dead bodies and being reunited with our loved ones."

Once returned, the bodies will be examined by forensic specialists to determine how they died.

The lawmakers were among dozens of high-value hostages - including ex-presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, a French-Colombian dual citizen, and three U.S. defense contractors - whom the rebels want to swap for imprisoned rebels.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez traveled to Colombia this week in a bid to help facilitate a breakthrough. Both Bogota and the FARC agree in principle to an exchange, but have long differed on the details.