

Venezuela frees Colombian prisoners

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SAN ANTONIO, Venezuela --

More than two dozen Colombian prisoners arrested three years ago in an alleged plot against President Hugo Chavez were freed Saturday in a goodwill gesture he hopes will help facilitate a prisoner exchange in Colombia.

The 27 Colombians who boarded a bus to return home after being pardoned by Chavez were among more than 100 men arrested three years ago on accusations of plotting to stage a rebellion and assassinate the Venezuelan leader.

In a speech in Caracas, Chavez said he expects to meet soon with a high-ranking representative of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, to arrange a possible exchange of hundreds imprisoned guerrillas for about 45 prominent rebel-held hostages.

Among those being held by the rebels are three U.S. defense contractors and former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, a French-Colombian citizen.

The Colombian government and the FARC have voiced support in principle for the swap but have long argued about how to achieve it.

Chavez acknowledged stepping into a difficult role, but said he hopes to eventually "move toward a peace accord in Colombia."

"Nothing is impossible when you put your heart into what you do," Chavez said. "If I had to go to the gates of hell to try achieve the humanitarian accord in Colombia, I'd be willing."

With Chavez's pardon, "a beautiful message is being sent to the world," Justice Minister Pedro Carreno said at a ceremony for the freed Colombians in the southwestern town of San Antonio.

Authorities say the men arrested on a ranch near Caracas in May 2004 were wearing military uniforms and were suspected of belonging to a Colombian paramilitary group. Chavez said they planned to attack the presidential palace.

Those who were freed had been convicted of military rebellion. The pardon was granted to 41 Colombians in all, including 14 who reportedly had already gone free. Dozens of others also were released previously.