

# France's Sarkozy backs Chávez in Colombian hostage talks

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CARACAS --

French President Nicolas Sarkozy is standing by Hugo Chávez as the Venezuelan leader attempts to negotiate the liberation of hostages held by Colombia's largest rebel group, Venezuela's foreign ministry said.

In a statement, the ministry said Sarkozy "ratified his support for the role that President Chávez has been playing in the pursuit of a humanitarian exchange in Colombia" during a telephone conversation with the Venezuelan leader on Tuesday.

France has firmly supported negotiations aimed at freeing Franco-Colombian hostage and former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, along with dozens of others being held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. Sarkozy has requested Chávez to ask FARC representatives for proof that Betancourt is still alive.

Chávez, who has yet to meet with the FARC, faces the daunting task of mediating a possible exchange of hundreds of imprisoned guerrillas for dozens of prominent rebel-held hostages, including Betancourt.

It remains unclear when or where the talks would take place.

Chávez has offered to hold talks in Venezuela, but on Sunday he said he was "willing to go into the deepest part of the largest jungle to talk with Marulanda," referring to FARC commander Manuel Marulanda.

The following day, Colombian Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said the government of Alvaro Uribe "does not consider appropriate" a meeting between Chávez and the FARC on Colombian soil.

Restrepo reiterated the Colombian government's support for talks between Chávez and the FARC in Venezuela. The idea was first discussed at an Aug. 31 summit in Bogotá in which Uribe authorized Chávez to play a mediating role in long-stalled talks to free the hostages.

Among about 45 prominent hostages held by the FARC are three U.S. defense contractors whose small plane crashed in the jungles while on an anti-narcotics mission in 2003.

During Tuesday's conversation, Sarkozy also invited Chávez to France, where "he would receive him as a friend," and promised to visit Venezuela soon, according to the foreign ministry statement.