

Colombian rebels to free 3 hostages

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

Colombian rebels will hand over three hostages to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, including an aide to former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and the woman's young son, according to a statement released Tuesday.

Chavez, at a summit in Uruguay, called the pledge by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, a "nice Christmas present" but noted: "They are in the middle of the jungle and I can't go and receive them personally, even if I wanted to."

The FARC made the announcement in a statement e-mailed to the Bogota office of Cuba's Prensa Latina news agency Tuesday, saying it would free Betancourt aide Clara Rojas, Rojas' son Emmanuel, and Consuelo Gonzalez, a former congresswoman kidnapped in 2001.

Neither Chavez nor the statement, dated Dec. 9, indicated when the three might be released. The FARC said they would be freed in Colombia to "Chavez or someone he designates." Chavez had been trying to negotiate a prisoner swap between the rebels and the Colombian government before President Alvaro Uribe called him off last month.

Colombia's top peace negotiator, Luis Carlos Restrepo, welcomed the FARC's decision. "Liberating (hostages) unilaterally is always welcome and this gesture by the FARC to President Chavez we approve of. Naturally we see this as a road that can continue opening."

Prensa Latina was the only news organization known to receive the statement, which it provided to The Associated Press. Rafael Calcines, a Prensa Latina correspondent in Bogota, said the statement came from an e-mail address from which the agency had received past FARC communications.

"Starting today we have begun to see how we can receive these two ladies and the child," said Chavez, adding that the FARC's septuagenarian leader, Manuel Marulanda, had decided some time ago to release some of its hostages.

The FARC had offered to release 46 high-profile hostages, including Betancourt and three U.S. defense contractors, in return for the release of hundreds of imprisoned rebels. Chavez was trying to work out a swap, but last month Uribe said Chavez had overstepped his mandate by directly contacting the head of Colombia's army.

Many relatives of the kidnapped criticized Uribe for ending Chavez's participation just as it was starting to show results. Betancourt's mother told Venezuelan state television Tuesday that the FARC announcement was the result of work by Chavez and his fellow mediator in the case, Sen. Piedad Cordoba of Colombia.

"I don't have the slightest doubt that this is because of the mediation of President Chavez and Piedad," Yolanda Pulecio said. "The only thing I ask the guerrillas is that they also think of my daughter, who is suffering so much."

Cordoba said in Washington that the news of the hostage release "is true," but did not say how she knew that. She said more hostages will be released later.

The FARC's statement called the decision to release the three "compensation" for Chavez and the families of the kidnapped.

Rojas was kidnapped as she accompanied Betancourt in campaigning for Colombia's presidency in February 2002. A book last year by a Colombian journalist said she gave birth to a son following a relationship with one of her captors. Emmanuel is thought to be about 3.

Rojas was last seen in a video released by the rebels in 2002. In May, police officer Jhon Frank Pinchao escaped after eight years in captivity and revealed Emmanuel's name, saying mother and son are kept apart.

"They don't leave the baby with her," Pinchao said. "They let her see him and all, but it's the guerrillas who care for him."

There has been a new sense of urgency regarding the fate of the hostages since the release last month of proof-of-life videos and letters in which Betancourt, a dual French and Colombian citizen, appeared depressed and haggard.

Under intense international pressure, Uribe this month offered the FARC a 60-square-mile "meeting point" in rural Colombia, where he proposed government and rebel representatives come together unarmed to discuss a possible prisoner swap.

The FARC, who are demanding a larger zone in southwest Colombia and have not agreed to go without weapons, said in the statement Tuesday that Uribe's proposal is "unacceptable," and called the president an enemy of peace.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy "is delighted" about the releases, a statement from his office said, adding: "Naturally, he is awaiting the decision to be confirmed, and especially that it become a reality."

Sarkozy hopes work will now begin toward freeing Betancourt and all other hostages whose health would justify a "humanitarian gesture," the statement said.