

# Relatives of kidnapped Americans visit Venezuela

The Miami Herald  
Sep. 25, 2007

CARACAS --

Relatives of three Americans held hostage by rebels in Colombia visited Venezuela on Tuesday to express support for President Hugo Chávez's efforts to mediate a swap of hostages for guerrilla prisoners.

The three U.S. defense contractors -- Keith Stansell, Marc Gonsalves and Tom Howes -- have been held by Colombia's largest rebel group since their small plane crashed in the country's southern jungles during a surveillance mission in February 2003.

Chávez planned to meet with six of their relatives on Tuesday night -- including Stansell's parents, Gene and Lynne Stansell, and 15-year-old son Kyle, Howes' wife Mariana Howes and 10-year-old son Tommy, and Gonsalves' father, George Gonsalves.

The last firsthand information they received about the hostages came earlier this year from an escaped hostage who spent 10 months in captivity at the same camp with the Americans.

The three Northrop Grumman Corp. contractors are among about 45 prominent hostages who -- if the two sides manage to reach a deal -- could be exchanged for rebel prisoners in Colombian jails.

The hostages' family members met privately on Tuesday with Patrick Duddy, the U.S. ambassador to Caracas.

"We hope that something may come of this. The U.S. is always open to initiatives by any country in coordination with the government of Colombia," said U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Robin Holzhauer.

Venezuela's socialist president is for the first time stepping into Colombia's long-running conflict as a facilitator, initially invited by Colombian Sen. Piedad Córdoba and accepted by President Alvaro Uribe.

The relatives travel on Wednesday to Colombia, where they plan to meet Colombia's peace commissioner and the U.S. ambassador. On Thursday, they are to meet Uribe in New York.