

Chávez clouds FARC talks

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, mediator in a FARC hostage-prisoner swap, appeared to be at odds with the Colombian administration.

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PARIS --

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez claimed Tuesday that Colombia's president was prepared to join him in meeting a top rebel commander in the jungle, even as Colombia tried to clip the outspoken Chávez's negotiating wings.

Chávez has assumed in recent months the role of mediator in efforts to secure a prisoner-hostage swap between Colombia and the FARC leftist rebel group. President Alvaro Uribe's government said Monday it was setting a time limit of the end of December for the Venezuelan president's efforts, signaling diminishing patience with the media spectacle some say Chávez has made of the mediation.

Speaking to reporters in Paris, Chávez appeared to brush off the deadline, renewing his offer to sit down with FARC leader Manuel Marulanda and saying Uribe told him he would join them.

"President Uribe said he would be willing to go there . . . to speak with Marulanda," Chávez said. He added that Uribe conditioned any talks on Marulanda releasing a first group of hostages. The two presidents met in Santiago, Chile, earlier this month.

Colombia's peace commissioner, Luis Carlos Restrepo, said Monday that Uribe was only disposed to meet with Marulanda if the FARC releases all its hundreds of prisoners -- not just the high-profile hostages, who include former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three U.S. defense contractors.

Chávez, however, suggested the size of the group remained undefined and that it would be up to the FARC to decide who would be released first. He laughed at a suggestion that all the prisoners would be freed in one batch.

"If they free everyone, why would I go?" Chávez asked.

He predicted that the fate of three U.S. defense contractors held by the FARC and two rebels imprisoned in the United States would be the main stumbling block to any future negotiations.

TOP-TIER PRISONERS

The FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, has demanded the two be included in any prisoner swap -- a condition Uribe has rejected.

A judge in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday postponed the sentencing of one of the rebels, Ricardo Palmera, also known as Simón Trinidad.

He was convicted of conspiracy in the seizure of the three American contractors. The other rebel, Nayibe "Sonia" Rojas, was convicted this year by a U.S. court of exporting cocaine.

The three American hostages have been held since their small plane went down in Colombia's southern jungles during a surveillance mission in February 2003.

Meanwhile, the five-year captivity of Betancourt, who is part French, has fixated France and was central to Chávez's talks on Tuesday with President Nicolas Sarkozy.

'INGRID IS ALIVE'

"Ingrid is alive. I'm absolutely certain," Chávez told reporters after talking with Sarkozy.

He also said he was counting on France's help in ironing out the swap. Betancourt's family -- and France -- want proof she is still alive. Chávez said Tuesday that Marulanda wrote promising to furnish that proof "by the end of the year."

Betancourt was campaigning for Colombia's presidency when she was abducted. The last time she was seen publicly was in a video in 2003.

Her mother, Yolanda Pulecio, welcomed Chávez's comments Tuesday as "very good news." She and Betancourt's other relatives met with Sarkozy and Chávez. "It is very reassuring for us."

Betancourt's daughter, Melanie Delloye, was more cautious. "President Chávez assures us that Mamá is alive. He is sure of it. Now we need, nevertheless, proof of life," she said.