

Colombian hostages' families fear future

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

Families of dozens of rebel-held hostages struggled with shock and grief following the Colombian government's decision to end Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's mediation with leftist guerrillas, seen by many as the best hope for freeing the prisoners.

About 50 people whose loved ones are being held by Colombian rebels gathered near the presidential palace in Bogota's Bolivar Plaza on Thursday to protest President Alvaro Uribe's earlier announcement.

With banners and T-shirts emblazoned with pleas for talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, they appealed for the safe return of their relatives, some of whom have endured more than a decade in captivity.

The FARC hold 45 high-value hostages, including three U.S. defense contractors snatched in 2003 and former French-Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who has become a cause celebre in France since her 2002 abduction. In return for their freedom, the guerrillas are demanding the government release hundreds of imprisoned rebels.

Any such deal was a distant prospect until Chavez agreed in August to mediate between the government and rebels.

But President Alvaro Uribe ended the Venezuelan leader's role late Wednesday after Chavez disobeyed a direct order from Uribe that all communication with the military must pass through him and contacted the head of Colombia's army. Uribe also ejected from talks Colombian Sen. Piedad Cordoba who had worked alongside Chavez.

Amid the angry crowd shouting for Chavez's return stood Jose Uriel Perez, whose nephew, Luis Alfonso Beltran, was taken by the FARC in a May 1998 attack on the military base where he was stationed.

"We thought it was very brave what President Chavez and Sen. Cordoba did in three months compared to what the government has failed to do in 10 years," said the elderly Perez, his low voice at times drowned out by the shouts around him. "Nothing touches this government: not the deaths, nor our mourning, nor the pain the families of the kidnapped live with."

In Caracas, Chavez said he accepted Uribe's decision with sadness.

"This path was opening up, with difficulty, but there was a path opening up," he said. "It was the beginning of a dialogue to try and bring peace back to Colombia."

Though Chavez's mediation was welcomed by the prisoners' families - desperate over what they saw as a lack of desire by the government and rebels to reach an agreement - Uribe's government grew increasingly annoyed with Chavez and Cordoba.

Photos appeared of Cordoba posing with a rebel commander in front of a huge banner of the FARC, which has been at war with the Colombian state for the past four decades.

"It worries me a lot that the search for a humanitarian agreement will be used by the guerrillas for various ends, to advance their policies and at the same time, their killing," Uribe said Thursday.

Chavez also angered Uribe earlier this week when he revealed that Uribe told him he was prepared to meet with FARC's septuagenarian leader, Manuel "Sureshot" Marulanda.

The Colombian government quickly issued a statement saying that Uribe, whose own father was killed by the FARC two decades ago, had told Chavez that in confidence.

Further disappointment surfaced when the FARC inexplicably failed to produce proof that the hostages are still alive, something demanded by the governments of Colombia, France and the U.S.

Hostages' families continue to insist that the help of Chavez, widely admired within the FARC for his socialist platform, was crucial in kick-starting a process that had stagnated.

Colombia's top peace negotiator, Luis Carlos Restrepo, said Thursday that he is resuming control of the process. Uribe's government has not held any face-to-face talks with the guerrillas since taking office in 2002.