

Colombia Halts Chávez's Rebel Mediation Role, Dimming Hopes for Prisoner Swap

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Nov. 22 -- [Colombia](#) has abruptly ended Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's role as a go-between with Marxist guerrillas, casting gloom on hopes of a possible prisoner swap that could have freed 45 hostages in hidden rebel camps.

The Colombian government said late Wednesday that it was ending Chávez's role as mediator after the garrulous populist sidestepped diplomatic protocol and, in a phone call, spoke directly with the head of Colombia's army about rebel kidnappings of soldiers. President Álvaro Uribe had earlier asked Chávez to discuss issues relating to the rebels directly with him.

The development disheartened relatives of hostages held by the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC. The captives include [Ingrid Betancourt](#), a French Colombian author and former senator, and three [U.S. Defense Department](#) contractors who have been in rebel captivity since 2003.

Jo Rosano, mother of Marc Gonsalves, one of the Americans, blamed Uribe, saying he had undercut the mediation efforts by Chávez and Colombian Sen. Piedad Córdoba, a leftist who is close to Chávez. Uribe had named Córdoba to pursue a humanitarian accord and later accepted Chávez's offer to help.

"This is not the first time that he's sabotaged this, and it won't be the last," Rosano said from her home in [Connecticut](#). "Shame on him is all I can say. The eyes of the world are on him."

The Colombian government's move also drew a quick response from French President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), who has pressed the Uribe administration to win release of the hostages. "We continue to think that President Chávez is the best chance for freeing Ingrid Betancourt and all the other hostages," a spokesman for Sarkozy, David Martinon, told reporters in [Paris](#).

But Chávez, too, came under withering criticism, just over a week before Venezuelans are to vote on constitutional changes that would abolish presidential term limits.

Constantly talking -- the president gives 40 hours of televised speeches a week -- Chávez revealed delicate details about the negotiations, including disclosing that Uribe might be willing to meet with FARC leader Manuel Marulanda.

Chávez also hosted the rebels in [Caracas](#), giving a group considered a terrorist organization a platform that irked the government in [Bogota](#). Uribe had tried to rein him in, announcing a Dec. 31 deadline on mediation.

Then, as Cordoba spoke from Caracas on Wednesday to Colombian army Gen. Mario Montoya, Ch_ívez got on the line, according to Colombia's Caracol Radio. "General Montoya, it's Hugo. How are you?" the Venezuelan leader said.

Ch_ívez asked him how many soldiers and police officers were held by the FARC. Montoya reported the call to the president's office, which decided to end the roles of Ch_ívez and Cordoba in seeking an exchange of rebel hostages for guerrillas in Colombian prisons.

Analysts said Ch_ívez's break with protocol was not a surprise. Earlier this month, Ch_ívez set off a diplomatic war of words by calling a former Spanish prime minister "a fascist" during a summit. Ch_ívez's tirade so angered [King Juan Carlos](#) that he leaned over a table and, in front of Latin American presidents, told Ch_ívez to "shut up."