

Colombia Ends Venezuela's Hostage Mediation Efforts

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BOGOTÁ, [Colombia](#), Nov. 22 — President [Álvaro Uribe](#) withdrew his support late Wednesday for efforts by President [Hugo Chávez](#) of [Venezuela](#) to broker the release of dozens of hostages believed to be held by this country's largest rebel group, including three American military contractors who were captured in 2003.

President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France quickly urged Mr. Uribe to reconsider; among the 45 or so political hostages seized by the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC, is Ingrid Betancourt, a former presidential candidate here with Colombian and French citizenship.

But Mr. Uribe, who had welcomed Mr. Chávez's offer in August to act as a mediator in the hostage negotiations, said Thursday that he had no intention of changing his mind. He said he based his decision on what he viewed as a breach of protocol by Mr. Chávez in contacting Gen. Mario Montoya, the top commander of the Colombian Army.

Mr. Chávez, with the help of a Colombian lawmaker assisting him in the talks, had telephoned General Montoya on Wednesday to ask for information about the hostages, despite a request from Mr. Uribe to refrain from direct contact with high-ranking military officials, the government here said in a statement.

"Chávez is not known for respecting protocol, and Uribe's strength is not flexibility," said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington research group that specializes in Latin America.

In a statement on Thursday, Venezuela's Foreign Ministry said, "The Venezuelan government accepts Colombia's sovereign decision, but it expresses its frustration."

The decision follows disappointing results in the negotiations. Mr. Chávez met in Paris earlier this week with Mr. Sarkozy but was unable to present proof that Ms. Betancourt or any of the other hostages were alive. The FARC has demanded the release of about 500 imprisoned guerrillas in exchange for its captives.

Political analysts here said the Marxist-inspired FARC, which has been waging a guerrilla war for the last four decades, could emerge strengthened.

"The great losers are the family members of the captives," said Camilo Gómez, a former peace commissioner for Colombia's government. "The winners are the FARC, which achieved an international political position they never had before," he said, referring to Mr. Chávez's meeting with a FARC emissary this month in Caracas.

Indeed, the despair of relatives of the hostages, some of whom have been held in jungle camps for almost a decade, intensified after Mr. Uribe's announcement.

“I don’t know how grave the incident was,” said Patricia Perdomo, the daughter of a lawmaker held by the FARC since 2001, referring to Mr. Chávez’s telephone call to General Montoya. “What is grave is the situation in which the captives find themselves in once again.”

The Americans held by the FARC are Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes and Keith Stansell, contractors for Northrop Grumman who were captured by the FARC in 2003 after their surveillance plane crashed in the jungle. The FARC, which finances itself through cocaine smuggling and kidnapping, calls the three men prisoners of war.

The United States sends Colombia about \$600 million a year to combat drug smuggling and to battle the FARC and a smaller rebel group, the National Liberation Army, or E.L.N. Colombia is the largest recipient of American aid in the Americas.

On Wednesday, William R. Brownfield, the United States ambassador to Colombia, took a sharply critical view of the negotiations. “We are two months and 22 days into this process and we still have no proof of life,” said Mr. Brownfield, who previously served as Washington’s top envoy to Venezuela.

Mr. Uribe, the Bush administration’s closest ally in South America, harbors a special hatred for the FARC, accusing them of murdering his father in a botched kidnapping attempt in the 1980s. But Mr. Uribe, who has a cordial political relationship with Mr. Chávez, had surprised many people here by welcoming his role as a mediator.

Economic ties between Colombia and Venezuela remain resilient, but the political relationship between them seems headed into a new phase of uncertainty. Reports of Colombian rebel operations in Venezuelan territory along the border already raised tension in recent days.