

Chavez: Uribe advisors want 'war'

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

President Hugo Chavez on Saturday accused the Colombian government of scuttling his efforts to negotiate a prisoner swap with leftist rebels, saying officials prefer "war" to talks on the possible release of 45 hostages, including three Americans.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe ended Chavez's high-profile attempt to mediate between Colombia's government and FARC rebels on Wednesday, after Chavez disobeyed the conditions of his involvement by speaking directly to Colombia's top army chief.

Chavez accepted Uribe's decision but on Saturday called his conversation with army Gen. Mario Montoya a "stupid excuse" to pull him from negotiations.

"There are people very close to Uribe, people with lots of power, who don't want there to be an agreement," Chavez said in an pre-dawn appearance on Venezuelan state television. "I wouldn't venture to say that (Uribe) doesn't want it, but I'm sure there are people very close to him who just want war" with the rebels.

A spokeswoman in Uribe's press office declined to respond to Chavez's specific comments, but an 18-point statement released by the office Saturday recapped its complaints.

"It's in the greatest interest of the terrorist FARC group to create fissures and antagonism between Colombian and Venezuela. We must not fall into the traps of terrorism," the statement said.

Chavez in August joined Colombian lawmakers in a new push to free hostages held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, better known as FARC. Prisoners include three U.S. military contractors and Ingrid Betancourt, a French-Colombian seized in 2002 while campaigning for Colombia's presidency.

The Venezuelan leader's came when, according to a statement released by the Colombian presidency, leftist Colombian lawmaker Piedad Cordoba called Gen. Montoya and passed the phone to Chavez, violating Uribe's order that the Venezuelan leader not speak directly with Colombian armed forces.

Chavez insisted he'd only asked the general an "innocent question" about the number of Colombian military personnel held by the FARC.

But citing unnamed Colombian government sources, the Bogota daily El Tiempo reported Friday that Chavez had tried to convince Montoya to support a bid to create a demilitarized zone for talks between the rebels and government - a long-standing FARC demand that Uribe has expressly ruled out.

The spat fuels an ideological gulf between Colombia and Venezuela, two relatively prosperous South American neighbors with deep trade ties who remain polar opposites politically.

Since taking office in 2002, the conservative Uribe has fought to crush Colombia's peasant-based rebel army with \$4 billion in U.S. military aid.

The socialist Chavez has meanwhile railed against U.S. involvement in the region and called for Uribe to negotiate peace with Colombian guerrillas.