

# Venezuela-Colombia crisis deepens

The Miami Herald  
Nov. 27, 2007

BOGOTA, Colombia --

A diplomatic crisis between Venezuela and Colombia deepened on Tuesday as President Hugo Chavez's government called its ambassador back to Caracas for talks.

The two countries' leaders have exchanged increasingly sharp words since Colombia's conservative Alvaro Uribe last week ended Chavez's efforts to broker a prisoner swap to free hostages held by Colombian rebels, including three U.S. defense contractors and French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt.

The guerrillas on Tuesday issued their first statement on recent events, saying that Chavez's participation in the fledgling talks had been "the only hope" for a deal.

Venezuela's foreign ministry announced it had called home Pavel Rondon, its ambassador in Bogota, "to oversee an exhaustive evaluation of bilateral relations."

A foreign ministry official said Rondon has been in Caracas since Saturday.

But Colombia's foreign minister, Fernando Araujo, vowed not to recall Colombia's ambassador in Caracas, insisting his government's dispute is with the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as the FARC, not Venezuela.

"The enemy of the Colombian people is the FARC," Araujo told a news conference.

The Andean neighbors share a 1,380-mile border and \$5 billion in trade last year, maintaining friendly relations despite sharp ideological differences - until now.

Uribe last Wednesday booted the leftist Chavez and a Colombian senator from talks with the FARC, saying the Venezuelan leader had violated the conditions of his involvement by speaking directly to the head of Colombia's army.

"Uribe's attitude is wretched, very wretched, to suspend the humanitarian mediation of President Hugo Chavez and Senator Piedad Cordoba, when it was the only hope for achieving a prisoner swap in Colombia," the guerrilla commander known as "Ivan Marquez" said a statement e-mailed to The Associated Press.

The rebel leader, who had traveled to Caracas to meet with the Venezuelan president earlier this month, thanked Chavez and Cordoba for trying to stimulate talks.

Since taking office in 2002, Uribe's government has had no face to face talks with the rebels. Some FARC hostages have been held for more than? 10 years.

Chavez on Sunday said he was putting relations with Colombia "in the freezer," calling Uribe a "liar" and accusing him of "not wanting peace."

Uribe replied hours later, claiming that Chavez is pushing an "expansionist project" across Latin America and seems to want Colombia to fall "victim to a terrorist FARC government".

The rebel force is holding 46 high-profile hostages whom it has pledged to release in exchange for hundreds of imprisoned guerrillas.

Uribe in August invited Chavez to help broker a deal with the leftist rebels, who are sympathetic to the Venezuelan leader's socialist ideals.

Colombia, Washington's closest ally in South America, has received billions of dollars in U.S. military aid in the past seven years to fight the FARC and the world's largest cocaine trade.