

Colombia Seizes Videos of Hostages

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CARACAS, Venezuela, Nov. 30 — [Colombia](#)'s government said Friday that its army had captured three guerrillas carrying videos, photographs and letters containing proof that more than 15 captives, including three American military contractors and [Ingrid Betancourt](#), a former presidential candidate, were still alive recently.

The evidence obtained Thursday night in Bogotá, Colombia's capital, offers new hope for the relatives of the hostages, who are believed to be held by the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC. Several of them have been held in the group's jungle camps for nearly a decade. Ms. Betancourt, who was kidnapped in 2002 and holds Colombian and French citizenship, appeared gaunt and apparently chained but clearly alive in the images released Friday.

"This will encourage us to redouble our efforts to obtain her release," President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France told reporters on Friday in the southern French city of Nice.

Clips of the seized videos broadcast on Colombian television showed the three Americans, Thomas Howes, Marc Gonsalves and Keith Stansell, who were captured in 2003 when their plane went down in the Colombian jungle. The videos of the three men were made in late October, Colombian officials said.

The last available evidence that Ms. Betancourt and the three Americans were alive was from 2003. Images and letters were also discovered relating to the survival of more than a dozen captured members of Colombian security forces and Luis Eladio Pérez, a senator kidnapped in 2001.

The information came a week after the Colombian president, [Álvaro Uribe](#), withdrew his support for President [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela's mediation with the FARC, a Marxist-inspired insurgency that has been at war with Colombia's government for the last 40 years.

Mr. Chávez received a hero's welcome in Colombia after his mediation efforts began in August, but disappointment followed when he visited Mr. Sarkozy in France this month without proof that any of the FARC's 45 or so political captives were alive. The FARC has asked for the release of about 500 imprisoned guerrillas in exchange for the hostages.

Piedad Córdoba, a Colombian senator who had been assisting Mr. Chávez in the FARC talks, said the evidence released Friday was en route to the Venezuelan leader. "The mediation of President Chávez was being done with responsibility, with seriousness," Ms. Córdoba said in an interview with Telesur, the pan-Latin American news network based here.

The images and writings of the captives were obtained in a raid carried out on Thursday by army investigators in Bogotá. Three people were taken into custody on kidnapping

and rebellion charges. Prosecutors said one of the detainees, Humberto Montaña Valencia, led an urban cell of the FARC.

The writings released Friday included a letter by Ms. Betancourt to her mother, Yolanda Pulecio, and a will written by Mr. Howes, one of the American captives, both dated in October. Mr. Howes and the two other Americans were employees of Northrop Grumman, a military contractor, when they were captured.

American companies have established a large military contracting apparatus in Colombia, and they reap part of the \$600 million in aid the United States sends to that country each year. Colombia is the largest recipient of American aid in the hemisphere, most of which is intended to combat drug trafficking and leftist guerrillas.

Photographs of the Americans and the other captives showed them against a thick jungle backdrop, making their whereabouts hard to determine. The image of Mr. Howes, for instance, shows him standing in a clearing, wearing rubber boots and a black T-shirt. A guerrilla holding a machine gun can be seen standing behind him.

Colombia, which is larger than California and Texas combined, has vast areas where the FARC and a smaller rebel group, the National Liberation Army, operate with relative ease. But the capture of the three rebels in Bogotá was seen as a success for Mr. Uribe, despite recent reports that FARC intelligence operatives had infiltrated the armed forces.

Some relatives of the captives pleaded with Mr. Uribe to allow Mr. Chávez to resume his mediation, but such a move was ruled out by Colombian officials after a bitter feud between the two leaders in recent days.

While family members were relieved at the evidence that their loved ones were recently alive, they also expressed exasperation about the chances of seeing them freed. "President Chávez should be permitted to resume his mediation," said Juan Carlos Lecompte, Ms. Betancourt's husband. "He was making progress, as one can now see."