

FARC videos show Betancourt, American hostages alive

**The videos, seized in a Colombian military operation,
are the first proof of life of the hostages since 2003.**

The New York Times
December 1, 2007

Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt and three US defense contractors, held hostage for years by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), appear alive and well in a series of videos seized Thursday by the Colombian military.

Agence France-Presse reports that the videos are the first evidence of the hostages' well-being since 2003. The videos, along with photographs of and letters from the hostages, were in the possession of [three suspected FARC members](#) captured in Bogota.

In one film dated October 24, Betancourt, who was kidnapped in February 2002 whilst running for the Colombian presidency, is chained and looks depressed.

Another video dated January 1 shows US State Department contractors Mark Goncalves, Kein Stambler and Thomas Howes, who were captured by the FARC in February 2003. They appear in better health than Betancourt.

The videos have no sound, but Restrepo said the Americans have sent messages to their families. The Americans were also last seen in a 2003 video taken by a Colombian journalist.

The videos also include images of several members of Colombian security forces also being held by the FARC.

The FARC has been engaged in a war with the Colombian government since its founding in the 1960s. Although the group started as a leftist rebellion, it has expanded into involvement in cocaine production and drug trafficking, and is considered by both the US and Colombian governments as a terrorist organization.

Ms. Betancourt, a former Colombian senator and presidential candidate, was captured by the FARC on Feb. 23, 2002, and is the [best known internationally](#) of the rebel group's hostages.

The three Americans were conducting antinarcotics operations for the US [when their plane went down](#) over FARC-controlled territory on Feb. 13, 2003.

No photos or video of Betancourt or the Americans had been seen since 2003. The FARC and the Colombian government have been attempting to negotiate a swap of the hostages for some 500 FARC members in Colombian and US prisons.

Reuters reports that the videos were [viewed positively in France](#), where Betancourt grew up and still has family.

"All we see is a single photo where she is sitting at a small table and appears fairly thin, with very, very long hair. She is looking down. I had the feeling that her hand was chained. It's a sad image of my sister, but she is alive," Betancourt's sister Astrid told LCI television in France.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy played a key role in recent efforts to broker a deal to free FARC hostages in exchange for jailed rebel fighters. Earlier this year, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe freed a FARC commander to try to broker talks and in August invited Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to mediate.

Sarkozy said the findings were encouraging.

"Now that we know she is alive, we must fight relentlessly to obtain her release and an end to this ordeal as quickly as possible," Sarkozy told reporters in Nice.

The **Associated Press** notes that although the tape on which the American hostages appeared was labeled Jan. 1, a Colombian hostage appearing on the same tape said the recording was made on Oct. 23. This date would fit with the [dates found on the hostages' letters](#).

One undated letter was from Howes to his wife, and another, dated Nov. 26, 2006, was his will, said the government. Another note was from Gonsalves to the military commander of the FARC, known as "Mono Jojoy", dated Oct. 23, 2007, and Betancourt wrote a letter to her mother, dated Oct. 24 2007. The government did not reveal details of the documents.

The seizure of the videos comes amid a bitter spat between Presidents Uribe and Chavez, whom Uribe had asked to negotiate with the FARC leadership for release of the hostages. But **The Economist** reports that Uribe cancelled those negotiations after Chavez directly contacted the commander of Colombia's Army, which Uribe had specifically asked him not to do. A [war of words](#) ensued.

Mr Chávez began by calling Mr Uribe a "liar and cynic" who "does not want peace", adding that Colombia "deserves a better president". Mr Uribe in turn accused his neighbour of seeking to "build an empire based on his [oil-rich] budget" and of wanting Colombia to be "a victim of a FARC terrorist government". That prompted Mr Chávez to dub Mr Uribe "a sad pawn of the empire" (as he likes to call the United States), say that he was putting relations with Colombia "in the freezer" and recall his ambassador in Bogotá. He would have "no type of relationship" with Mr Uribe's government, he vowed.

The spat between Bogota and Caracas marks [the worst relations](#) between the two countries since a Colombian warship entered disputed waters in 1987, writes the **British Broadcasting Corp**. But the flare-up may have as much to do with Chávez's domestic troubles as it does with relations with Colombia. Chávez is fighting to expand his power in a national referendum on Dec. 2, and some polls indicate the vote is close.

Opposition groups say that Chávez is looking to distract voters by exacerbating the rift with Uribe.

But **Bloomberg** notes that the spat is [unlikely to harm economic links](#) between the two nations, with one analyst suggesting that Chávez's barrage "is him covering up his embarrassment after Uribe fired him."