

Hostages in Colombia on Videos

Footage Seized From Three Suspected Guerrillas Gives Families 'Proof of Life'

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Nov. 30 -- Captured videos on Friday gave the outside world the first look since 2003 at three Pentagon contractors held hostage in [Colombia](#), showing them to be haggard but alive. French Colombian writer and former presidential candidate [Ingrid Betancourt](#) was also shown, looking thin and dispirited.

The videos, seized by the Colombian army from three suspected guerrillas in [Bogota](#) on Thursday night, brought relief to hostage families as far away as [Connecticut](#) and [Paris](#).

In the videos, the hostages appear to be in a clandestine jungle camp operated by Marxist rebels. A surveillance plane carrying the three Americans crashed in rebel territory in 2003; Betancourt was seized in 2002, and her release has become a priority for [French President Nicholas Sarkozy](#).

"I'm happy because of the proof of life, but I see a picture of my daughter that shows her very sad, very thin, having suffered much," Yolanda Pulecio, Betancourt's mother, told Colombian radio.

Betancourt, a former senator known by all Colombians as vivacious and attractive, looked demoralized after five years in rebel hands. She wore a grimy-looking T-shirt, and her normally stylish hair was down to her hips. She stared at the ground, without looking up.

The Americans, Keith Stansell, Marc Gonsalves and Thomas Howes, appeared standing in a jungle clearing, briefly staring at the camera. The men are considered the longest-held American captives in the world.

Stansell's mother, Lynne, said that seeing the video of her son was at once comforting and upsetting. He has "lost a lot of weight. His cheeks have sunken in."

"To us, it was like, whoa, a very stark difference from when he left," she said in a phone interview from [Florida](#). "But still, we're very grateful, very gratified that this proof of life did surface."

George Gonsalves, Marc's father, said the images "brought back memories of [Hanoi](#)" and prisoners of war in [Vietnam](#).

Colombia's peace commissioner, Luis Carlos Restrepo, told reporters in Bogota that authorities had seized five videos and that the footage had been taken in October. There was also footage of a dozen Colombians, soldiers and policemen captured by the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC, in combat.

The army seized letters Howes had written to his wife, as well as his will. Three soldiers had also written letters to their families, as had Betancourt, who wrote a long letter to her mother dated Oct. 24.

In Colombia and [France](#), where the release of Betancourt is a cause celebre, the videos prompted a strong reaction.

"Looking at this photo of Ingrid, which has saddened my soul, I can say that what I lived in was a five-star hotel compared to what she's living in," said Colombian Vice President [Francisco Santos](#), referring to his own ordeal as a hostage.

The FARC, which has been fighting the Colombian state since 1964, often kidnaps prominent people for political gain, a strategy that has drawn sharp rebukes from around the world.

But the Colombian government on Friday also came under criticism related to the hostages. President Álvaro Uribe's decision last week to end Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's role as a mediator with the FARC touched off a bitter diplomatic dispute and angered families who said Chávez was the best chance for obtaining the hostages' release. Uribe had accused Chávez of sidestepping diplomatic protocol.

Colombian Sen. Piedad Córdoba, who had been working with Chávez to release the hostages, said the videos had likely been meant for the Venezuelan president to see.