

PRESIDENT CHAVEZ AND THE HUMANITARIAN MEDIATION IN COLOMBIA

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez explains his political vision as inspired by the 19th Century independence leader, Simon Bolivar, who sought to unite the South American continent as a single political unit. Chavez has always pushed for a similar unity, but in a modern context that emphasizes the commonalities between nations as much as the right to sovereignty of each one. Venezuela took this vision of international cooperation to another level by offering support for a peace process in neighboring Colombia, where an armed conflict has lasted for over four decades.



In September 2007, President Chavez was approached by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe (pictured at left) to serve as the chief negotiator in a hostage-for-prisoner swap between the government and rebels. A Colombian opposition Senator tapped to facilitate the negotiations, Piedad Córdoba, had suggested that President Chavez could play a role. The hostage talks began promisingly, with communication between Chavez, Colombian state representatives, guerrilla leaders, and heads of state in solidarity abroad. Chavez and Uribe met several times to discuss the talks, which were aimed expressly at reaching an accord that would release 45 civilian hostages – including 3 US military contractors – in exchange for perhaps hundreds of guerrilla rebels who have been imprisoned over the years.

To the great disappointment of all parties involved in the talks, President Uribe called an abrupt and unexpected end to the process on November 21, 2007. He explained the decision to cancel the talks as a response to a short though unauthorized conversation between President Chavez and the head of the Colombian armed forces.

Nonetheless, in early January of 2008, the FARC rebels announced their intention to release two hostages to President Chavez. After several delays, which the hostages later said were due to the fact that they were under fire from Colombian armed forces, the release was achieved on January 10.¹ The humanitarian mediation called for by President Chavez is an effort to restore hope to a nation fraught with conflict and limit the spread of violence and displacement beyond Colombia.

President Chavez and many others remain committed to the cause of peace in Colombia and to the belief that the conflict can reach a political negotiated solution, not a military one. The future of the humanitarian mediation remains uncertain. In what follows, we will consider its course so far.

VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA: A HISTORY OF COOPERATION

Venezuela and Colombia have a long history of close relations, including strong cultural, political, and economic ties. Although Presidents Chavez and Uribe have often been described as ideological opposites, they have a history of cooperation on issues such as trade, migration issues, combating drug trafficking and terrorism, as well as security along the 1,400-mile long border shared by the two countries. Prior to the diplomatic discord caused by Uribe's cancellation of the humanitarian mediation, political analyst Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue commented that the two leaders had a "surprisingly cordial relationship, with a record of cooperation on energy and economic issues."²

This history of cooperation meant that President Chavez's role as chief negotiator in hostage talks in Colombia was a logical one. It also bodes well for the future of bilateral relations, which analysts generally agree will not likely suffer any long-term negative effects from the current clash.

PRESIDENT CHAVEZ AS PEACE NEGOTIATOR

Since September 2007, the victims of Colombia's conflict placed their hopes in President Chavez to negotiate a deal that would reinvigorate the peace effort. As chief negotiator between the FARC rebels and the Colombian State, Chavez bore the responsibility of striking a deal between two parties that have been locked in a stalemate, unable to trust one another for decades.

President Chavez was chosen to negotiate the humanitarian deal precisely because he counted on the confidence of both the government and the guerrillas in Colombia. The three-times elected leader of Venezuela came to office as an outsider candidate, and thus knows what it is like to struggle in the margins of the political system, as the FARC have done.

Moreover, during his presidency, Chavez gained credibility among leaders worldwide by overseeing a successful democratic project that has reduced poverty and revolutionized the representative capacity of the government since 1999. The constitution enacted that year, the first year Chavez was in office, was penned by a constituent assembly comprised of diverse civil society groups and approved in a national assembly that saw high voter turnout. Many experts recognize Venezuela's 1999 Constitution as one of the most advanced in the world on the issue of human rights, for it guarantees access to free healthcare and education for all citizens.

The Venezuelan government has often pledged to help achieve peace in Colombia. On August 24, 2007, the *Washington Post* reported: "Chavez, who has had cordial relations with Uribe despite ideological differences, has offered another, surprising proposal aimed at brokering a deal."³ President Chavez began the humanitarian mediation in Colombia with characteristic enthusiasm, inviting the families of Colombian hostages to Caracas to suggest ways to solve the crisis.

On August 31, 2007, President Chavez met with President Uribe in Colombia to discuss the possible hostage swap. Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba (pictured at right with Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives) was to be the only party present at the talks besides Chavez and guerrilla leaders. Córdoba met FARC leader Raul Reyes in September and brought a recorded message to Chavez agreeing to a preliminary meeting in October.⁴ Córdoba also traveled to Washington, DC to draw attention to their cause in the US Congress.



When President Uribe refused to grant the guerrillas a demilitarized zone in which to hold negotiations, Chavez proposed hosting them in Venezuela. Preliminary talks between Chavez and the FARC were scheduled to take place in Caracas on October 8, but were again delayed when President Uribe balked at the idea of allowing the FARC to leave Colombia. Uribe only cautiously expressed his faith in the process, saying, "I hope the rebels free the hostages at President Chavez's request. But we will express all of our gratitude to President Chavez ... whether or not the effort proves successful."⁵

This, however, was no longer the case after November of 2007, when Uribe dictated an abrupt end to Chavez's humanitarian mediation. The switch led to harsh words between the two presidents, and at present, Uribe still does not endorse the hostage releases being brokered by President Chavez.

"THIS IS THE HIGHEST OUR HOPES HAVE EVER BEEN"

Washington Post columnist on Latin American and Latino affairs Marcela Sanchez has written that Chavez is perhaps the individual best suited to negotiate the prisoner swap, for he has earned the respect of all parties involved. Sanchez, who has frequently been critical of the Venezuelan government, said, "Chavez's involvement is the single most important element that makes this attempt the most promising in recent memory."⁶

Accordingly, support for the humanitarian mediation has come from international organizations as well as many governments around the world. UN High Commander Antonio Guterres congratulated the Chavez administration on its powerful bid for peace during the 58th session of the Executive Committee of the Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees.⁷ Brazilian President Lula da Silva offered to help by lending the use of Brazilian territory to carry out negotiations. A government representative said, "Brazil trusts President Chavez as a mediator of this conflict and has offered the possibility, should it be necessary, of holding meetings on Brazilian soil."⁸

French President Nicholas Sarkozy has also been an enthusiastic supporter of Chavez's role in the negotiations. French-born former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt has been held captive by the FARC since 2002, and is among the 45 hostages that Chavez worked to liberate. Chavez met with a French diplomat and traveled to Paris to discuss the negotiations.

On October 6, 2007, the US National Latino Congreso passed a resolution to support Venezuela's humanitarian mediation in Colombia. Some 2,000 participating organizations signed the agreement to "recognize this humanitarian effort led by Venezuela as the most important step in the peaceful resolution of so many decades of war and all its destructive consequences in its sister nation, Colombia." Likewise, US Ambassador to Colombia William Brownfield recognized the importance of the humanitarian mediation by Chavez. Brownfield, also a former US Ambassador to Venezuela, said "we welcome the efforts of anybody... to facilitate the liberation of all the people kidnapped, including the US citizens."⁹

In late September 2007, during a meeting in Caracas between Chavez and the relatives of the US citizens who are among those being held hostage in Colombia (pictured here), Chavez appealed to the US for assistance in the negotiations by saying, "To President Bush: hopefully you can help us."¹⁰ Some political analysts judged the involvement of Chavez in the likely



hostage swap as a threat to US dominance in the region.¹¹ However, Venezuela sought to make the hostage negotiation an act of international solidarity throughout the hemisphere and the world, an effort around which a global consensus could emerge.

Families of the US hostages in Colombia were not disheartened by delays in the talks. The relative of one of three US citizens among those expected to be freed in the hostage-for-prisoner swap said, "This is the highest our hopes have ever been.... The eyes of the world are upon us."¹² Another affirmed that Chavez is providing "a hope, a light that we haven't seen for a long time."¹³

REACTIONS TO URIBE'S UNTIMELY CANCELLATION OF TALKS

On November 30, 2007, new video footage was released showing that hostages held in Colombia, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three US citizens, are indeed alive. The news came a little over a week after Colombian President Alvaro Uribe abruptly canceled the negotiations by President Chavez and Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba. Uribe claimed that Chávez had disobeyed orders by speaking briefly to the head of the Colombian armed forces.

French President Sarkozy responded to the unfortunate news by urging Uribe to reconsider and saying, "We continue to think that President Chavez is the best chance for freeing [French citizen] Ingrid Betancourt and all the other hostages." Families of the hostages were less diplomatic, saying "It is clear that the Colombian president does not want to hear about a humanitarian accord."

According to the BBC, Uribe's halt to the accord was met by marked disappointment in Colombia, where half a century of conflict has created a nation desperate for peace. The *Washington Post* reported that the families of the US hostages also lamented Uribe's decision. A Connecticut woman said, "Shame on him is all I can say. The eyes of the world are on him."

THE HUMANITARIAN MEDIATION BEGINS TO BEAR FRUIT

As 2007 came to a close, and with talks seemingly tabled, President Chavez got word from the FARC that the rebels indeed planned to release two captives into his care. The first days of 2008 brought only more waiting. On January 10, the FARC finally appeared to hand over Consuelo Gonzalez and Clara Rojas, and the women were flown to safety by the Red Cross. They later told the press that their earlier release was prevented by attacks from the Colombian armed forces.¹⁴

On January 31, the FARC announced their intention to release three more hostages. This second release is expected to grant freedom to Gloria Polanco, Luis Eladio Perez and Orlando Beltran, all of whom were kidnapped in 2001. In a statement, the FARC explained that "These releases are a direct consequence of the realistic, transparent and integral efforts of President Chavez."¹⁵

President Chavez said on February 9th that the first steps had been taken to ensure that the hostages would be liberated. He urged "calm and patience," but remained optimistic, saying "We are hoping that everything will turn out the best way possible."¹⁶

Despite obstacles including opposition from the governments of Colombia and the US, President Chavez and facilitator Piedad Cordoba have continued to work for a negotiated end to the conflict. Their conviction that the conflict cannot be solved through military ends came under criticism, particularly when Chavez argued for dropping the "terrorist" label assigned the FARC by the US after 9/11 in favor of recognizing the combatants as legitimate armies. This was likely an effort to emphasize the particularity of the Colombian context and the role of the FARC as historical actors

with a political agenda. However, audiences critical of Chavez have dismissed his insistence on a peaceful political solution as a show of sympathy for the FARC.

Instead, President Chavez contends that he is firmly "on the side of peace" in the humanitarian mediation, as allegations questioning his motives continue to surface. Meanwhile, as the violence continues in Colombia and increasingly affects Venezuela and the rest of the region, Chavez's humanitarian mediation remains the best hope for the hostages and the only current effort toward reaching true reconciliation. As expressed by the sister of Colombian captive and former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, the Venezuelan leader "knows how to advance things. For us today President Chavez is indispensable."¹⁷

¹ "Freed Colombian Hostage Relied on Radio," Frank Bajak, Associated Press, February 5, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/05/AR2008020502870.html>

² "Can Hugo Chavez Help Americans?" By Michael Shifter, *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 2007. <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/sunday/commentary/la-op-shifter7oct07,1,2798947.story>

³ "After a Long Trek Across Colombia, Hostage Advocate Not Ready to Rest," by Juan Forero, *Washington Post*, August 24, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/23/AR2007082302331.html>

⁴ "Colombia Captives' Families Undaunted by Talks Delay," By Helen Murphy, Bloomberg, October 4, 2007. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&sid=aVhQaTQ9GbNs>

⁵ "Uribe Cautious on Talks to Free Captives," By Alexandra Olson, Associated Press, September 26, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/26/AR2007092602021.html>

⁶ "Farc's Chance to Do Right for Colombia," By Marcela Sanchez, *Washington Post*, September 28, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/27/AR2007092701137.html>

⁷ "Venezuelan Efforts Praised, Meeting Postponed in Colombian Hostage Negotiation," By Kiraz Janicke, *Venezuelanalysis*, October 4, 2007. <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/2686>

⁸ "Chavez Offered Neutral Spot to Deal With Colombian Rebels," By Michael Astor, Associated Press, September 20, 2007. <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/americas/venezuela/story/244218.html>

⁹ "US backs President Chávez's mediation for freedom of hostages" *El Universal*, October 11, 2007. http://english.eluniversal.com/2007/10/11/en_pol_art_us-backs-president-c_11A1125629.shtml

¹⁰ "Anti-US Chavez Urges Bush Help on Colombia Hostages," Reuters, September 26, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/news/news-venezuela-usa-chavez.html>

¹¹ "Can Hugo Chavez Help Americans?" By Michael Shifter, *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 2007.

¹² "Colombia Captives' Families Undaunted by Talks Delay," By Helen Murphy, Bloomberg, October 4, 2007. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&sid=aVhQaTQ9GbNs>

¹³ "Farc's Chance to Do Right for Colombia," By Marcela Sanchez, *Washington Post*, September 28, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/27/AR2007092701137.html>

¹⁴ "Latin America News Coverage: Half the Story is Worse Than None," By Mark Weisbrot, *Alternet*, February 1, 2008. <http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/75697/>

¹⁵ "Colombian Guerrillas to Set Free Three More Hostages" By Matthew Walter, Bloomberg, February 3, 2008. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=azf3utJ.VRjk>

¹⁶ "Venezuela's Chavez says 'first steps' taken to release rebel-held hostages," Associated Press, February 10, 2008. <http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2008/02/09/news/Venezuela-Colombia-Hostages.php>

¹⁷ "Chavez 'needed' for Betancourt release" *Press TV*, January 30, 2008. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=40950§ionid=351020703>