

VENEZUELA AS MEDIATOR: THE ROLE OF PRESIDENT CHAVEZ IN COLOMBIA'S HUMANITARIAN ACCORD

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



In September 2007, President Chavez was invited by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe (pictured at left) to serve as the sole negotiator in a hostage-for-prisoner swap between the government and guerrilla rebels. The invitation came at the suggestion of Piedad Córdoba, the Colombian opposition Senator tapped to facilitate the negotiations. Talks began promisingly, with sustained communication between President Chavez, the guerrilla leadership, Colombian state representatives, and leaders of other countries in solidarity abroad. Chavez and Uribe have met several times to discuss the negotiations, which are ongoing and aimed expressly at reaching an accord that will release perhaps more than 45 civilian hostages as well as up to 500 guerrilla rebels who have been imprisoned over the years.

A humanitarian effort, the hostage negotiation being undertaken by Chavez is giving hope to a nation fraught with civil conflict for decades, and lifting the spirits of the families of hostage victims, including three North American families. US military contractors Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell were kidnapped by the FARC in 2003 while working in Colombia. This report looks at bilateral relations between Venezuela and Colombia, President Chavez's role as negotiator in the current hostage-for-prisoner swap, where the talks are headed, and what people are saying about them. Finally, it should be recognized that this humanitarian undertaking serves as an inspiration both to those directly affected by the protracted conflict in Colombia as much as to those people all over the world who work to achieve peace within and across borders.

VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA: A HISTORY OF COOPERATION

Venezuela and Colombia have long had good diplomatic relations. Though they have been described as ideological opposites, Presidents Chavez and Uribe have consistently collaborated on issues such as trade and economic integration, border security, migration issues, and combating drug trafficking and terrorism. Political analyst Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue has said that the two leaders "have a surprisingly cordial relationship, with a record of cooperation on energy and economic issues."¹ In light of this history of cooperation, the involvement of President Chavez in the peace process, a matter of utmost importance to the Colombian state, is not surprising. Rather, it seems natural that Venezuela would lend a hand.

BACKGROUND: THE CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

Venezuela has historically been a very peaceful country. But while Venezuela has gained a reputation for a high degree of democratic stability, across its border to the West, Colombia has been embroiled in violent political struggles for much of the last century. Colombia had scarcely recovered from a "thousand days' war" in the 19th Century when 20th Century clashes began between the national government and its marginalized opponents, leftist groups that saw no chance of achieving representation through traditional politics.

In 2006 Colombian police reported that 17,206 people had died violent deaths, a figure largely attributable to clashes between armed groups and the country's drug trade, one of the world's largest. The United Nations has calculated that the number of people internally displaced – forced to leave their homes and communities – due to violence associated with the conflict now numbers about 2.3 million.

The United States became involved in the conflict when President Clinton signed an aid package called Plan Colombia in 2000, making Colombia the third-largest recipient of military assistance in the world. Initially, the aid was channeled to counter-narcotics operations. But in 2002, President Bush allowed Plan Colombia funds to be mobilized in counter-terror efforts. With the Colombian guerrillas now classified as "terrorists," the military had a license to pursue its anti-insurgent warfare ceaselessly, and at the expense of US taxpayers.

PRESIDENT CHAVEZ AS PEACE NEGOTIATOR

Now that the standoff between armed actors has lasted for over forty years, the Colombian people are demanding a solution. Peace processes also have a long history in Colombia, but have always proven unsuccessful.

Victims of Colombia's conflict have placed their hopes in President Chavez to negotiate a deal that will turn the tide of past failed peace efforts. Chavez was invited by President Uribe at the behest of Senator Piedad Córdoba, whom he appointed to facilitate a hostage-for-prisoner swap between the Colombian government and the guerrilla group FARC. The negotiations propose that 45 civilians held captive by the FARC would be freed in exchange for the release of perhaps some 500 guerrilla affiliates being held in Colombian jails. As chief negotiator, Chavez bears 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 has 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.

President Chavez began the humanitarian mediation in Colombia with characteristic enthusiasm and self-assuredness. He invited the families of Colombian hostages to Caracas to suggest ways to solve the crisis. The Venezuelan government had previously offered to help solve the Colombian crisis, and on August 24, 2007, the Washington Post reported that "Chavez, who has had cordial relations with Uribe despite ideological differences, has offered another, surprising proposal aimed at brokering a deal."²



On August 31, 2007, President Chavez met with President Uribe in Colombia to discuss the possible hostage swap. Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba (pictured at left with Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives) will be the only party besides Chavez and guerrilla leaders who will be present at the talks. Córdoba met FARC leader Raul Reyes in September of this year and brought a recorded message to Chavez agreeing to a preliminary meeting in October.³ 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 conduct the negotiations, Chavez proposed hosting them in Venezuela. Preliminary talks between Chavez and the FARC were scheduled to take place in Caracas on October 8, 2007, but were pushed back to a later date when President Uribe balked at the idea of allowing the FARC to leave Colombia. Uribe and Chavez are now set to discuss ways to move forward with the initiative. Uribe has cautiously expressed his faith in the process by 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."⁴

"THIS IS THE HIGHEST OUR HOPES HAVE EVER BEEN"

Washington Post columnist on Latin American and Latino affairs Marcela Sanchez wrote 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."⁵

Support from international organizations as well as governments in other parts of the world has been forthcoming. United Nations High Commander Antonio Guterres congratulated the Chavez administration on its powerful bid for peace on October 3rd, during the 58th session of the Executive Committee of the Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees.⁶ In 2004, the UN declared Colombia to be in a state of humanitarian emergency, after calculating that some 2 million people had been internally displaced by violence associated with the armed conflict.

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."⁷ French President Nicholas Sarkozy has been an enthusiastic supporter of Chavez's role in the negotiations, as well. French-born former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt has been held captive by the FARC since 2002, and is among the 45 high-profile hostages that Chavez is working to liberate. Chavez met with a French diplomat on October 4th to discuss the negotiations.

On October 6, 2007, the National Latino Congreso of the United States 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." In fact, support in the US for Venezuela's humanitarian efforts in Colombia is growing. US Ambassador to Colombia has recognized the importance of the humanitarian mediation by Chavez, and sees it as a positive development. William Brownfield, former US Ambassador to Venezuela and current Ambassador to Colombia, said "we welcome the efforts of anybody... to facilitate the liberation of all the people kidnapped, including the US citizens."⁸

In late September, 2007 during a meeting held in Caracas between Chavez and the relatives of the three US citizens who are among those being held hostage in Colombia (pictured here), Chavez appealed to Bush for assistance in the negotiations by saying, "To President Bush: hopefully you can help us."⁹ Some political analysts have judged the involvement of Chavez in the likely hostage swap as a threat to US dominance in the region.¹⁰ However, Venezuela is embracing the opportunity to make the hostage negotiation an act of international solidarity throughout the hemisphere and the world, an effort around which a cross-border consensus can emerge.



Families of the US hostages to be released in Colombia if negotiations by President Chavez succeed are not disheartened by a delay in the talks. The relative of one of three US citizens who are 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."¹¹ Another affirmed that Chavez is providing "a hope, a light that we haven't seen for a long time."¹²

¹ "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>

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- ³ "Colombia Captives' Families Undaunted by Talks Delay," By Helen Murphy, Bloomberg, October 4, 2007. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&sid=aVhQaTQ9GbNs>
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- ⁵ "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>
- ⁶ Venezuelan Efforts Praised, Meeting Postponed in Colombian Hostage Negotiation, By Kiraz Janicke, *Venezuelanalysis*, October 4, 2007. <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/2686>
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- ⁸ "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
- ⁹ "Anti-US Chavez Urges Bush Help on Colombia Hostages," Reuters, September 26, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/news/news-venezuela-usa-chavez.html>
- ¹⁰ "Can Hugo Chavez Help Americans?" By Michael Shifter, *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 2007.
- ¹¹ "Colombia Captives' Families Undaunted by Talks Delay," By Helen Murphy, Bloomberg, October 4, 2007. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&sid=aVhQaTQ9GbNs>
- ¹² "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>