

BEAUTIFUL STAGECRAFT OR FEAT OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE?

A closer look at Colombia's celebrated
hostage rescue

by Dirk Ewers



On July 2, 2008, the world celebrated the liberation of Ingrid Betancourt, three American military contractors, and ten Colombian military officials. The three Americans have since compiled excerpts of their humiliating experience in a book, *Out of Captivity: Surviving 1,967 Days in the Colombian Jungle*. While the successful outcome of Operation *Jaque* speaks to the importance of international cooperation between law enforcement, military, and intelligence officials, the continuous strife over the rebel's extradition casts doubt on the official story and illustrates the shortcomings of the Colombian justice system.

“The Guards of Ingrid Betancourt were paid off”

An early rumor planted by a FARC emissary¹ in Switzerland mentioned a ransom payment to the captors, but this claim was quickly dismissed. Yet Noel Saëz, a French diplomat who led efforts to negotiate the release of Betancourt from 2005 to 2008, also believes the two guerrillas were bribed. In an interview with *Le Figaro*², Saëz reveals that

1 Kern, Soeren. Why Europe doubts Colombia's hostage rescue. Strategic Studies Group. 29 July 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?fecvnodeid=9&fecvid=33&ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&cv33=106569&cid=88631> on 2 Feb. 2009.

2 Boulin, Jérôme. Noel Saez: “Les geoliers de Betancourt

Colombia's president, Álvaro Uribe, informed French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner of the capture of *César*'s³ wife in February 2008. *César* was one of two guerrillas in charge of the hostages. Saëz continues that, subsequently, *César* sent a message to the Colombian government, expressing his willingness to release the hostages in return for a guarantee that he would not be extradited. On June 15, 2008, fifteen days before Operation *Jaque*, Uribe directly alluded to this information during one of his weekly forum meetings.⁴ There is also another report that claims the FARC planned to release the hostages but that the Colombian military interfered in the release.⁵

Military and intelligence cooperation trick the FARC into turning over their most valued hostages

In 2003, the FBI intercepted a phone call from Conde, *César*'s wife, to a FARC contact in Miami who provided the guerilla group with high tech equipment, satellite phones, and GPS devices. Unbeknownst to Conde, the Miami contact had agreed to cooperate with the authorities in exchange for a lighter prison sentence.⁶ Following the conversation, the FBI equipped the satellite phones with listening devices, enabling the Colombian military to listen in on FARC's conversations and to locate the camp of FARC leader No. 2, *Raúl Reyes*, in Ecuador. After a

bombing raid killed *Reyes* on March 1, 2008, the Colombian military retrieved his computers and USB disks, which contained nearly 609 gigabytes of valuable intelligence information.⁷

Uribe's disengagement tactics provide the crucial element for Operation *Jaque*

In the same month, the Uribe administration's most successful tactics in undermining the insurgency claimed its first victim among the FARC leadership. The youngest member of the FARC politburo, *Iván Ríos*, died at the hands of his own bodyguard.⁸

In a similar vein, a large number of rank and file members left the FARC. Fed up with their superiors, disillusioned with a war that was no longer winnable, and desperate for a normal life⁹, they were lured by potential rewards and the prospect of evading persecution. For instance, *Karina*, a feared guerrilla leader, turned herself in last June. She is now a paid government employee, acting as a promoter for peace and helping others to quit the FARC.¹⁰ The death of *Manuel Marulanda*, the legendary founder and FARC leader, topped off the darkest month in the FARC's 40-year history.

Two additional desertions became crucial for the success of Operation *Jaque*: a female FARC radio operator, who deserted in early 2008, and a former bodyguard of newly designated FARC leader *Alfonso Cano*. Both collaborated with Colombian authorities by intervening into FARC's internal communication channels. Imitating the voice of

ont été achetés". Le Figaro. 10 March 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2009/03/09/01003-20090309ARTFIG00478-noel-saez-les-geoliers-de-betancourt-ont-ete-achetes-.php> on 12 March 2009.

3 Names in italics refer to the person's nom de guerre.

4 Jiménez, Camilo. "Los centineles de Ingrid fueron comprados". *Semana*. 10 March 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.semana.com/noticias-conflicto-armado/centinelas-ingrid-fueron-comprados/121579.aspx> on 12 March 2009.

5 Lucas, Kintto. Colombia: Did the Army 'steal' FARC's Hostage Release? IPS News. July 8, 2008. Retrieved from <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=43111>. 12 March 2009.

6 Bajak, Frank. US, Colombia choked rebel communications network. Associated Press. 10 July 2008. Retrieved from http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D91RAQ5O0&show_article=1. 22 March 2009. Retrieved from

7 Interpol. Interpol's Forensic Report on FARC Computers and Hardware Seized by Colombia. May 2008. 22 February 2009. <http://www.interpol.int/Public/ICPO/PressReleases/PR2008/pdfPR200817/ipPublicReportNoCoverEN.pdf>

8 Caracol. El guerrillero de las FARC "Iván Ríos" fue asesinado por su guardia personal. Caracol Radio. 7 March 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.caracolradio.com/nota.aspx?id=559986> on March 14, 2009.

9 Horgan, John. *The Psychology of Terrorism*. Routledge. New York. 2008, Ch. 7.

10 BBC. Colombia releases ex-FARC rebels. BBC News. 7 March 2009. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7929783.stm> on March 10, 2009.

Alfonso Cano, the ex-bodyguard instructed *César* to bring the three groups of hostages to one location¹¹ and to wait for further instructions.

Questions about the official story

According to a National Geographic documentary¹² that had privileged access to the military and intelligence agents involved in the rescue, however, *César* actually received these orders from his immediate superior *Mono Jojoy*, via a planted radio operator. *Mono Jojoy* is a hardliner within the FARC politburo and the known architect of the strategy to take civilian hostages. The Colombian military had put severe pressure on his outer security perimeter, severely limiting his ability to communicate.¹³ But the FARC also uses human messengers, and does not rely entirely on radio communication. Furthermore, marching three groups of the highest prized hostages across the jungle for two months requires precise coordination to arrange security and food supplies. Is it truly conceivable that such an operation escaped the attention of two of the top FARC leaders?

“The FARC: Why are they releasing their hostages?”

Obviously, there is more at play than meets the eye. I spoke to two people who were directly involved in the negotiations over the past

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five years, but their answers were inconclusive. The private contractor believed that a deal took place, while the government official denied such a charge. Political analysts in Colombia are similarly divided about the motives behind the recent unilateral hostage releases.¹⁴ While recent territorial losses might compel the FARC to revert to tactics of extortion, *Alfonso Cano* is also known to be a political strategist. He likely realizes that the FARC gains no political benefit from political hostage taking, especially without the presence of the international community. But no analyst has gone as far to suggest that *Alfonso Cano* gave his tacit approval to the July 2008 liberation, though it certainly strengthened his position vis-à-vis the hardliner *Mono Jojoy*, the leader in charge of the hostages.

The aftermath and the pending extradition of César

Controversy arose after the Colombian Supreme Court denied the extradition of *Gafas*, the other FARC member in charge of the hostages, because “the crimes for which he is wanted were committed on national territory.”¹⁵ U.S. ambassador William Brownfield initially protested the decision but later apologized to the Court.¹⁶

11 Farah, Douglas. Lessons Learned From The Campaign Against The FARC. The NEFA Foundation. 16 November 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefafarclessonslearned1108.pdf>. 22 March 2008.

12 Garcia, Alvaro. Colombia Hostage Rescue. Paraiso Pictures LTDA. For National Geographic. 2008. <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/episode/colombia-hostage-rescue-4310/Overview>

13 Semana.com. The Siege of “Mono Jojoy”. Semana. 9 March 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.semana.com/noticias-print-edition/the-siege-of-mono-jojoy/121571.aspx> on 13 March 2009.

14 Semana. The FARC: Why are they freeing their hostages? 31 January 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.semana.com/noticias-print-edition/the-farc-why-are-they-freeing-their-hostages/120320.aspx>. 10 March 2009.

15 Bajak, Frank. Colombian Court: No extradition in US kidnap case. Associated Press. 4 Feb. 2009. Retrieved from http://www.montereyherald.com/ci_11628372 on 6 Feb. 2009.

16 El Tiempo. Brownfield Se Disculpa Con la Corte Suprema. 27 March 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-3376668>. 10 April 2009.

The Supreme Court meanwhile granted the extradition of *César*, not for hostage taking, but for drug trafficking, adding the stipulation that he can *only* be prosecuted for the latter crime.¹⁷ This is significant. In July 2007¹⁸ the Federal District Court in Washington, D.C. convicted and later sentenced FARC leader *Simón Trinidad* to 60 years in prison for conspiracy to take the three American contractors hostage.¹⁹ He was, however, initially extradited on drug charges, but this trial ended with a hung jury.²⁰

Even if *César* is convicted on drug charges, would such a conviction truly do justice to the victims of his ordeals? And furthermore, shouldn't the United States, the main funder of Colombia's war efforts, expect that crimes of deep human indignity such as kidnapping be appropriately dealt with in the country of origin? As of now, *César's* extradition still awaits President Uribe's signature. ■

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17 El Espectador. Corte Suprema emite concepto favorable a la extradición de 'César'. 19 February, 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.elespectador.com/articulo119608-corte-suprema-emite-concepto-favorable-extradicion-de-cesar> on 2 February 2009.

18 Associated Press. FARC leader convicted in Taking of 3 U.S. Hostages 10 July 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/09/AR2007070901591.html>. 22 March 2007

19 WW4 Repor's blog. FARC negotiator gets Colombia's max – in US prison. World War 4 Report. 28 Jan. 2008. Retrieved from <http://ww4report.com/node/4997> on 13 March 2009.

20 Apuzzo, Matt. Associated Press. US Seeks Symbolic Drug War Victory. 4 March 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2008/03/04/national/w094132S42.DTL>. 22 March 2009.