

## COLOMBIA

# The Little Cold War

by Daniel Coronell

**A**n attempt by the Venezuelan president to end the long captivity of 54 hostages held by Colombian guerillas has devolved into the most serious crisis in relations between the two countries in their history. And all because the proof of life didn't arrive on time.

The story began on August 15, 2007. That day, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez received permission from his Colombian counterpart, Álvaro Uribe, to attempt to negotiate an exchange of prisoners between the government of Colombia and the communist guerrilla fighters of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia).

The goal was that the FARC would liberate the captives, a few of whom have been in captivity for more than 10 years, and that in exchange the Colombian government would release more than 400 imprisoned guerilla combatants.

Many analysts thought that Chávez was the right man for the job. The FARC defines itself as a “Bolivarian organization” and has expressed sympathy for the government of Venezuela.

At first glance it seemed a political “win-win” situation. Uribe would be relieved of the responsibility for finding a way to approach the FARC, which has proved elusive during his five years in power. Chávez would bolster his international image by taking a leadership role in resolving a humanitarian problem which, due to the presence of three Americans and a French-Colombian citizen in the group of captives, has high visibility in Europe and North America.

Furthermore, the two could alleviate their respective internal pressures: In Colombia, 16 members of congress from Uribe's governing coalition are in prison and 40 are under investigation for alleged connections with rightist paramilitary groups, while in Venezuela, Chávez is confronting an opposition enflamed by a referendum which, had it passed, would have amended the Constitution to eliminate presidential term-limits and consolidate his power. (The referendum was defeated on December 2 by a narrow margin.)

The political expedience and the humanitarian veneer of the agreement augured good things for the two leaders' relationship. Three months later, however, Chávez and Uribe are mutually denouncing each other in terms never before used by the presidents of these two “sister” nations.

## A Clash of Images

The recent histories of Colombia and Venezuela are marked by the politics of the cult of personality. Both nations are headed by strong men who — notwithstanding opposite political leanings — possess great similarities.



Presidents Hugo Chávez (left) and Álvaro Uribe meet in an...

The rightwing Uribe maintains approval ratings upwards of 70 percent thanks to a strict security policy and a hard line stance towards the guerilla groups many blame for the country's ongoing violence. Chávez, who touts his “21st century socialism,” has funded his ambitions with a flood of revenue resulting from the rise of oil prices to

nearly \$100 a barrel.

Every Sunday, Hugo Chávez appears on “Hello, President” his program on the state-run television channel. Wearing his customary red shirt, the president uses this hours-long platform to promote his government, to denounce his detractors and, occasionally, to sing. It was on this program some months ago where he addressed the president of the United States, saying in deliberately rustic English, “You are a donkey, Mr. Danger.”

The Colombian president also likes to appear on television. Saturdays, Álvaro Uribe — dressed like a peasant — spends up to 12 hours in front of the cameras directing his Community Council. He recites from memory statistics



Photo from AFP/Getty Images

... August 2007 summit to discuss the hostage exchange.

of dubious veracity that demonstrate the achievements of his government, scolds his subordinates, solves community problems in the region he is visiting and rancorously denounces his few detractors.

For men like these, determined constructors of their own image, ceding the spotlight is a tall order.

As the hostage negotiations wore on, Chávez’ “Hello, President” became a nightmare for his Colombian counterpart.

In one memorable episode that featured Chávez’ signature laid-back Caribbean style, the Venezuelan president addressed the camera as if he were speaking to the chief leader of the FARC, Manuel Marulanda: “Marulanda, Marulanda, I want to talk to you.” Then, turning immediately toward another camera he continued, as if speaking to the Colombian president, “Uribe, if Marulanda wants to come here to talk to me, give him an airplane... give him a cup of coffee.”

In the Andean formality of the Colombian capital, Chávez’ pitch was interpreted as a recognition of the guerillas’ political legitimacy. “It puts the president and the outlaws on the same plane,” stated a close Uribe aide in a radio interview.

The first week of November, Iván Márquez, a member of the FARC secretariat, went to Caracas to meet with Hugo Chávez.

In this meeting, the guerilla leader promised to hand over proof of life for all the hostages up for exchange, including the ex-presidential candidate Ingrid Betancort, whose five-year captivity had garnered significant attention in Europe because of her dual French and Colombian citizenship. He also offered to show evidence of the survival of the American contractors Keith Stansell, Marc Gonsalves and Thomas Howes who fell into the hands of the FARC when their airplane — one of many used to monitor coca production as a part of the U.S.-funded Plan Colombia — was brought down by guerilla fighters in the country’s southern jungle.

The FARC’s promise was an important development; the last evidence that the captives were still alive was presented four years ago.

The Colombian government, however, received news of this advance with reserve. The photograph of the guerilla leader at President Chávez’ side on the steps of the Palacio Miraflores was read not as a step forward in the mediation but rather as a humiliation for the Colombian state.

President Uribe declared that it was inconceivable that “a terrorist would pose as a great political leader on the international stage.”

To Uribe’s even greater annoyance, the international profile of the negotiations continued to grow. Chávez increased the number of parties involved without consulting the Colombian government. A few Democratic members of the United States Congress were informed of developments. The president of Brazil, Lula da Silva, expressed his support for Chávez’ mediation and offered his country as a possible site for the captives’ eventual release.



Photo from AFP/Getty Images.

Relatives of people kidnapped by guerrillas cast shadows over their pictures during a protest in Bogotá.

The president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, interested in developments because of Ingrid Betancourt's involvement, began to talk with Chávez, ignoring Uribe, who — at the express request of the French head of state — had in June unilaterally released 150 guerilla fighters, including Rodrigo Granda, known as the FARC's "foreign minister," in an unsuccessful attempt to facilitate Betancourt's release.

On November 20, while Hugo Chávez was visiting Paris, the first winds of a long-threatened storm began to blow. The proof of life, which Chavez had announced would appear that day, failed to arrive. Perhaps the person who most needed the evidence was the president of France. Sarkozy, who was in the midst both of handling a strike precipitated by his efforts to revamp the pension system and a scandal concerning alleged child-trafficking in Chad involving French officials, would have been able to alter this difficult domestic agenda with a photo or a video of Betancourt, who had become something of a cause-célèbre in France. But nothing arrived.

In a long press conference, the Venezuelan president tried to focus his remarks on the king of Spain, who a week before at the Ibero-American summit in Santiago de Chile had told Chávez to "shut up." He spoke about oil, Iran and his impending referendum in Venezuela; the French press-corps, however, pressed him to comment on the humanitarian exchange in Colombia.

It was then that Chávez revealed that Uribe was willing to meet with Manuel Marulanda, the leader of the FARC. It didn't take long for the Colombian president to react. In a communiqué released that afternoon, Uribe's office affirmed that the president had spoken of this possibility with Chávez, in confidence and as an element of negotiation. It added that this meeting would be possible only after the liberation of all the hostages and as a part of final armistice negotiations with the FARC. The statement concluded that it was now necessary to have a deadline for Chávez' mediation, to ensure that the process would produce results; the deadline was set for December 31, 2007.

The announcement in effect condemned Chávez' mediation to failure. Uribe was asking him to do in one month what no one in Colombia had been able to achieve in five years. Events quickly took a turn for the worse.

## The Days of Rage

The FARC had been unwilling or unable to send the evidence of the hostages' survival on time. Chávez, however, was confident that he could get Uribe to extend the deadline if the promised letters, photos and videos arrived by November 30. Chávez was to be aided in obtaining this material by the Colombian senator Piedad Córdoba, a member of the opposition Liberal party, who was Bogotá's

chief representative in the mediation.

Senator Córdoba was working from Caracas so that the members of the Colombian establishment would maintain their confidence in Chávez' mediation.

While working from Miraflores, Córdoba placed a call to the commander of the Colombian army, General Mario Montoya. In the midst of their conversation, President Chávez walked by and asked the senator with whom she was speaking. Upon the senator's response, Chávez asked to speak with the general. He offered Montoya a greeting and then asked him how many members of Colombia's armed forces were in the hands of the FARC. Both the Venezuelan president and the Colombian senator affirm that the exchange lasted less than a minute.

When Uribe learned of the conversation, he determined it to be a violation of protocol and sufficient reason to terminate a process which, it was becoming apparent, provided many advantages to Chávez, some to the FARC and none to him.

Uribe terminated the binational negotiations in a statement released November 22. Once again, the captive's families were left without hope.

The initial reaction from Caracas was tempered. The Venezuelan government expressed its surprise at Uribe's move but voiced its respect for the sovereign decision of the Colombian government.

Three days later, however, on "Hello, President," Chávez exploded. He said that Uribe was a liar; that his attitude towards Venezuela was disrespectful; and that Colombia deserved a better president.

In addition, he threatened that economic relations would suffer. Promising to put relations with Colombia "in the freezer" he ordered the Venezuelan military to go on maximum alert because the

United States government could take advantage of the occasion to attack Venezuela from Colombian territory.

Two hours later, Uribe counterattacked. In a less vehement tone but using equally irreversible language, Uribe said that Chávez was lying; that he had an expansionist plan for the continent; and that he was a "legitimizer of terrorists" who seemed intent on installing a FARC government in Colombia.

In the following days Chávez escalated his rhetoric further. He recalled his ambassador to Colombia (a move normally meant to signal an impending rupture of diplomatic ties) and threatened that as long as Álvaro Uribe continued in power Venezuela would have relations "neither with him nor with the Colombian government."

Uribe, by contrast, toned down his belligerence. Trade between Colombia and Venezuela totals \$6 billion per year, and Colombia — whose exports to its neighbor are more than three times its imports — has a great deal more to lose than Venezuela should trade

be curtailed. A million Colombians would lose their jobs if trade were to be interrupted.

No one knows who will take the next step. In an interview three days before Venezuela's referendum, the country's foreign minister, Nicolás Maduro insinuated that relations with Colombia could be officially broken off.

Meanwhile in Bogotá, in the early dawn of November 30, the Colombian army captured three messengers who were carrying the evidence of the hostages' survival that could have prevented all of this. There were photographs and videos of various captives, among them the three Americans and Ingrid Betancourt. She doesn't speak; she looks very thin and immensely sad.

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The Colombian government released this photo of Ingrid Betancourt on November 30, 2007.



Photo from Associated Press.