

## Colombia: a miraculous rescue, and what comes next

By Adam Isacson,  
Created 2008-07-07 13:20

If Hollywood knows what it's doing, at least one studio has already commissioned a script and begun recruiting talent for a [movie](#) [1] about the daring [hostage-rescue](#) [2] in Colombia on 2 July 2008. Colombian military-intelligence personnel, after taking acting classes and thoroughly jamming guerrilla communications, rescued fifteen hostages by posing as members of a fictitious pro-guerrilla humanitarian group that was to transport the captives to another camp.

The ruse freed French-Colombian politician [Íngrid Betancourt](#) [4], three United States defence contractors, and eleven Colombian police and soldiers who had been captives of the [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia](#) [5] (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia / Farc) for more than five - and some as many as ten - years. The whole world has since enjoyed footage of the sophisticated operation, and of the hostages' moving reunions with their families (even as questions are raised about whether [money](#) [6] changed hands and to what extent foreign [agencies](#) [7] were involved in the affair).

The hostage rescue is a big victory for Colombia's military, a force until now better known for its troubled record of [human-rights abuse](#) [8]. In 2003, the Colombian army, helicopter-rotors chopping and guns blazing, had invaded a camp where the Farc was holding a group of hostages. The guerrillas, with the extreme cruelty that has come to characterise them, killed nearly all of their captives. For years, the hostages' relatives lived in fear that the Colombian military would attempt to repeat this experience (see Myles Frechette, "[Colombia: interrupted lives](#) [8]", 21 January 2008).

Instead, the military chose a far subtler strategy, one fraught with risk for the small number of operatives carrying it out. That it was capable of pulling it off without firing a shot represents, for the Colombian military, an important break with its past.

### The Farc in freefall

For the Farc, by contrast, the hostage rescue could hardly be a more crushing blow. It is the latest in a [series](#) [9] of defeats and humiliations that has severely hobbled the insurgent group. As recently as early 2007, the Farc seemed to be geographically unified, hermetically secretive, and rigidly disciplined. Since then, its run of bad luck has been catastrophic (see Ana Carrigan, "[Colombia's guerrillas: between past and future](#) [9]", 16 June 2008).

Adam Isacson is director of programmes at the [Center for International Policy](#) [3], Washington DC

Also by Adam Isacson in **openDemocracy**:

"[The United States and Colombia: the next plan](#) [3]" (12 March 2007)"

"[The Colombia-Venezuela-Ecuador tangle](#) [3]" (14 March 2008)

In June 2007 the Farc earned worldwide condemnation when it killed eleven of its captives under circumstances that remain murky. The movement has in the past year lost four front-commanders in battle, and three members of its previously untouchable seven-person secretariat: one ([Raúl Reyes](#) [10]) killed by the Colombian military, one ([Iván Ríos](#) [11]) killed by his own men, and one ([Manuel Marulanda](#) [12]), who co-founded the group in 1964 - to a heart-attack. To add insult to injury, Marulanda's death was revealed not by the Farc but by Colombia's defence minister, citing intercepted guerrilla communications.

In November 2007, the military captured guerrilla messengers transporting hostage "proofs of life". A month later, the Farc suffered the embarrassing "baby Emmanuel" [episode](#) [13], in which the guerrillas were revealed to have lost track of the hostage (and Betancourt aide) Clara Rojas's 3-year-old son, who had [ended up](#) [14] in the government child-welfare system. In July 2007 and February 2008, the Farc had to endure two massive anti-guerrilla protest marches, with tens of millions of Colombians taking to the streets to express their rejection (see Catalina Holguín, "[Colombia: networks of dissent and power](#) [14]", 4 February 2008). The guerrillas' leadership saw its internal communications embarrassingly revealed via captured laptop computers. Then, in June 2008, the group even had to endure Hugo Chávez telling it to release its captives and disband.

Another year like this one, and there won't be much left to the Farc. Certainly, the group will still be around, in some form, for years to come. Tens of millions of dollars in drug profits and a presence in many regions of Colombia's national [territory](#) [15] will ensure that. So will the crushing poverty of so many neglected areas in rural Colombia, which may make Farc membership a survival option for young people with few other choices.

But it is clear that the Farc's decline is accelerating and irreversible. While this owes in large part to the Colombian military's improved capabilities, the Farc - reviled at all levels of Colombian society - is also reaping what it has sown. What began as a peasant-based bid for revolution against a corrupt oligarchy lost its way many years ago, when its leadership decided that drug money could somehow substitute for popular support. After too many years of abusing the poor rural population that should be its political base, the Farc is now in freefall.

## A presidency in bloom

The main political [beneficiary](#) [16] of the Farc's steady collapse, and of the stunning hostage-rescue operation, is Colombia's right-of-centre president, [Álvaro Uribe](#) [17]. The president was elected in 2002, and re-elected in 2006, on promises to press the guerrillas militarily, rejecting "appeasement" at the negotiating table. The results of an opinion-poll released on 6

Also in **openDemocracy** on Colombia's politics and internal violence:

Isabel Hilton, "[Álvaro Uribe's gift: Colombia's mafia goes legit](#) [12]" (25 October 2005)

Sue Branford, "[Colombia's other war](#) [12]" (14 November 2005)

Ana Carrigan, "[Colombia's elections: the regional exception](#) [12]" (10 March 2006)

Ana Carrigan, "[Colombia's testing times](#) [12]" (29 March 2006)

Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, "[Colombia needs a Contadora: a democratic proposal](#) [12]" (29 May 2006)

Jenny Pearce, "[The crisis of Colombia's state](#) [12]" (14 May 2007)

Ana Carrigan, "[Pawns of war: the Colombian hostage crisis](#) [12]" (15 November 2007)

Myles Frechette, "[Colombia: interrupted lives](#) [12]" (21 January 2008)

Catalina Holguín,

July showed that, in the wake of the rescue, Uribe's approval [18] rating among Colombians stands at an incredible 91%.

Uribe's term ends in 2010; just before the hostage rescue was announced, Colombia's political system was being convulsed by a bitter debate about whether to change the country's constitution to allow the popular president to run for an unprecedented third [19] consecutive term. In Latin America, third presidential terms have often heralded authoritarianism and institutional breakdown. Nonetheless, the successful hostage operation gives re-election proponents a great deal of momentum.

While the Farc are a force of darkness in Colombia, it does not necessarily follow that Álvaro Uribe is the light (see Jenny Pearce, "Colombia: who are the enemies of peace and democracy?" [19]", 9 April 2008). The president has been tarnished by a national scandal in which many of his political associates stand accused of colluding with murderous, drug-fuelled paramilitary [20] death-squads. His 2006 re-election has been questioned by the conviction of a former congresswoman who accepted bribes in exchange for her decisive committee vote to amend [21] the constitution to allow Uribe to run a second time. The president's public statements often reveal a disturbing inability to distinguish between political opponents - including victims' advocates and human-rights defenders - and "terrorists".

Uribe's stratospheric popularity may make it difficult [22] for Colombia's state to maintain checks and balances between the executive and a weaker legislature and judiciary. Moreover, investigations of past wrongdoing, including paramilitary relations with the president's supporters, may face political obstacles [23].

The prospects for negotiations are dim as well. Any who advocate talks with the guerrillas instead of an intensified military campaign - including neighbors like Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who had offered to mediate talks - will simply be "in the way". As long as the present correlation of political forces reigns in Colombia, the neighbours' services will not be required (see "The Colombia-Venezuela-Ecuador tangle" [23]", 14 March 2008).

## **A strategy in balance**

Meanwhile, the hostage rescue has given the George W Bush administration a rare foreign-policy victory. United States personnel were involved in the operation's planning, and contributed intelligence, jamming of guerrilla communications, and probably other services. Many analysts are portraying the liberation as a vindication of Plan Colombia [24], the aid programme that has provided Colombia \$6.1 billion in US assistance since 2000, \$4.8 billion of it (\$17 per second) for Colombia's military and police.

It is important, though, that Washington not draw the wrong lessons from this experience, especially not in the middle of a political campaign. How much of the \$4.8 billion has truly contributed to Colombia's recent success against the Farc?

About three-quarters of this amount has gone to anti-drug operations, mostly aerial fumigation with herbicides of small farmers who grow coca, the plant used to make cocaine. There is little to show for this huge investment, as Colombian cocaine production is unchanged - at best - since Plan Colombia began in 2000. Much of the non-drug aid, meanwhile, has gone to large-scale "shock and awe" offensives, like the Plan Patriota operation [25] of 2004-06 that sent

"Colombia: networks of dissent and power [12]" (4 February 2008)

Jenny Pearce, "Colombia: who are the enemies of peace and democracy?" [12]" (9 April 2008)

Ana Carrigan, "Colombia's guerrillas: between past and future [12]" (12 June 2008)

18,000 troops into guerrilla strongholds in southern Colombia. These have increased military presence in such zones, but have failed to push the guerrillas out or capture top leaders (see "[The United States and Colombia: the next plan \[25\]](#)", 12 March 2007).

Instead, three new strategies in particular do appear to be working. First, intelligence is [targeting](#) [26] both the guerrillas' top leadership and hostage-captors, but not - as in the past - members of Colombia's political left. Second, the guerrillas' young, poor rank-and-file is being lured away by programmes to encourage desertion. Instead of fearing torture or disappearance - as in the past - deserters now look forward to job-training and the promise of a new life. Third, emphasis has gone toward increasing the security forces' presence in population centres and (though there is much room for improvement here) making these forces' main mission protecting citizens instead of treating them as suspects.

These gentler, smarter efforts have capitalised on the Farc's huge unpopularity, even in zones of guerrilla influence, and they are having a snowballing effect as new deserters and intelligence sources come forward. But support for these initiatives, unfortunately, has made up only a tiny sliver of the United States' aid packages to Colombia over the years. US policy-makers should [take note](#) [27]: instead of crediting the recent successes as a triumph of *Plan Colombia* in its entirety, they must abandon the costly strategies that have failed and plough those resources into what is working - including projects to improve non-military governance in vast territories that have never known a state presence before.

But for now, let's continue to [express](#) [28] our joy on the freed hostages' behalf. Let's recall too that the Farc continues to hold twenty-five more hostages, many of them for ten years or more, in order to press for a prisoner exchange; and that another 700 guerrilla hostages continue to be held for ransom (see Ana Carrigan, "[Pawns of war: Colombia's hostage crisis \[28\]](#)", 15 November 2007).

Enough is enough. The Farc must follow the advice and recommendations of many - including [Fidel Castro](#) [29] - and release its captives now, unconditionally, as a first step toward rejoining the civilised world. If it remains obdurate on the issue, the Colombian government - supported by the international community - must find the lowest-risk way to bring the hostages back, whether through further subterfuge or as part of a negotiated peace process.

---

**Source URL:**

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/colombia-a-miraculous-rescue-and-what-comes-next>

**Links:**

[1] [http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5g\\_gGJpPPsgJEtFITcbBWt4A0mH8Q](http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5g_gGJpPPsgJEtFITcbBWt4A0mH8Q)

[2] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,563619,00.html>

[3] <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/index.htm>

[4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7266587.stm>

[5] <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9272/>

[6] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-colombia7-2008jul07,0,7390815.story>

[7] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/998838.html>

[8] <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k8/docs/2008/01/31/colomb17754.htm>

[9] <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5410&l=1>

[10] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/raul-reyes-colombian-guerrilla-leader-790503.html?r=RSS>

[11] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7284222.stm>

[12] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/manuel-marulanda-commander-of-the-farc-guerrilla-army-during-four-decades-of-insurgency-against-the-colombian-state-834337.html>

[13] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/11/2136730.htm>

- [14] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/11/2136730.htm>
- [15] [http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm\\_hm/colombia.htm](http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm_hm/colombia.htm)
- [16] [http://www.economist.com/world/la/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=11671322](http://www.economist.com/world/la/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11671322)
- [17] <http://web.presidencia.gov.co/presidente/>
- [18] <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSN06348039>
- [19] [http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/30618/two\\_thirds\\_in\\_colombia\\_back\\_new\\_term\\_for\\_uribe](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/30618/two_thirds_in_colombia_back_new_term_for_uribe)
- [20] [http://www.cfr.org/publication/15239/colombias\\_rightwing\\_paramilitaries\\_and\\_splinter\\_groups.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/15239/colombias_rightwing_paramilitaries_and_splinter_groups.html)
- [21] <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSN2719388420080627>
- [22] [http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=11670366](http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11670366)
- [23] [http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=viewp&id=588&Itemid=2](http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=viewp&id=588&Itemid=2)
- [24] [http://www.usip.org/library/pa/colombia/adddoc/plan\\_colombia\\_101999.html](http://www.usip.org/library/pa/colombia/adddoc/plan_colombia_101999.html)
- [25] <http://www.cipcol.org/?p=114>
- [26] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1581212/Phone-led-US-experts-to-Farc-leader-Raul-Reyes.html>
- [27] <http://ciponline.org/colombia/index.htm>
- [28] <http://www.cipcol.org/?p=629>
- [29] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7492506.stm>



This article is published by Adam Isacson, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.