

Expert Says Colombian Conflict Has Entered New Era



Betancourt's release can be seen as a victory for Colombian President Uribe's government

DW-WORLD.DE spoke with Carsten Wieland, head of the Columbian branch of the Konrad Adenauer foundation about the dramatic rescue of Ingrid Betancourt and 14 other hostages from their FARC captors.

DW-WORLD.DE: What is known about the state of Ingrid Betancourt's health?

Carsten Wieland: Her health was the subject of much speculation over the past few weeks, and we don't know much more as of yet. Colombian journalists have been invited to the scene of the rescue by Defence Minister Santos, and I'm sure that we'll soon see images on screens everywhere. The last pictures of Ingrid Betancourt were very depressing; we heard from a fellow hostage that she was suffering from depression and various diseases, and she looked very thin.

Was the rescue expected? Why did it happen now?

I think the rescue was expected. As we know, in the last few weeks and months, FARC suffered a series of blows and has been broken down into different factions which weren't able to move about within the country. That's a huge hindrance if you have a large number of hostages. Aside from the 15 hostages that have been freed, there are 42 other political hostages and several hundred more Colombians being held by FARC -- that's a significant burden for a guerrilla force that is in crisis. It probably wasn't possible for FARC to move the hostages quickly or hide their tracks from the army. I think that's why the location of the hostages was known, and government agents were able to observe the hostages for a longer time.

How long do you think it will take for the other hostages to be freed?

I think we can be fairly certain that the locations of many of the other hostages are known. It's a question of time before more will be freed, less so through military operations and more so due to traitors. The blow delivered to FARC by the release of these 15 hostages could cause many FARC rebels to start thinking about whether they want to cooperate with the authorities. There's been a string of prominent desertions in recent weeks, and there's been an erosion in FARC's ranks that could lead to more hostages being released.

Could the release of Betancourt also be seen as an offer on the part of FARC leader Alfonso Cano to the Uribe government?



Betancourt, right, seen here with her mother, was FARC's trump card

No. If this were the case, FARC would have handled it more intelligently, and not allowed the government any opportunity to present it as a rescue situation. Currently, we only have the government's version of events, as well as the pictures and other evidence that point to it actually having been a rescue. FARC's political head, Alfonso Cano, would have used his trump card -- namely Betancourt and the three American hostages -- differently -- at the start of peace talks for instance, so that he would have had something in his hand against the government. Now, FARC has very little.

Is President's Uribe's political strategy on FARC paying off?

The last few months, but today especially, mark the biggest success Uribe has had in achieving security in Colombia. His tough stance against the guerillas is paying off, as are the increasing incentives being offered to ex-rebels by the government. It started with the disarmament of the paramilitaries in 2005, but there have been increasing incentives for guerrillas to turn themselves in. The military strategy is being coupled with a strategy for peace and post-conflict management in the regions that have been liberated. It's a big success for the Uribe administration, and also explains his huge approval ratings of over 80 percent.

Do you think we are seeing the beginning of the end of FARC and decades of internal conflict in Colombia?

We've entered a new era in terms of the conflict in Colombia. We no longer have the trio of typical actors, namely paramilitary, guerrilla and weak state. Rather, we have a state that is not just strong militarily, but that also enjoys popular support while, on the other side, we have illegal groups, or terrorists, as they're now referred to. Then there are remnants of the old conflict, and among these is FARC, or what remains of FARC. It could be that in the months or years to come, we'll have a scenario where FARC consists of just a few hundred fighters that aren't really relevant anymore, but that's the optimistic variation. The more cautious scenario is one where Cano succeeds in reviving FARC elements in Colombian cities. Still, FARC isn't the number one problem anymore and this latest blow causes one to wonder whether FARC can still be referred to as a guerrilla force or rather just a criminal group. But I think it's premature to speak of an end to the conflict.