

Swiss radio: Betancourt and hostages not rescued but released

By [Global Research](#)

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[Update, 23:10, the Colombian government held a press conference about the hostage operation and it has released a film, shown on CNN, of the rescue operation, including the moment when the hostages were told they were freed. The lack of a film was one of the reasons cited earlier as leaving the question open of a ransom. The film does not, however, show clearly what happened to the Farc rebels on the helicopter.]

Bogota, Colombia & Switzerland (GenevaLunch) – What was being hailed as a “daring rescue mission” in the Colombian jungle, which ended with the rescue 2 July of French-Colombian Ingrid Betancourt and 15 other people, is now being described by some as merely a “release of hostages” after the payment of a \$20 million dollar ransom. The controversial version of the release was broadcast 4 July by Swiss public radio, RSR, which cites an unidentified but “reliable source” close to the operation.

Frederich Blassel, author of the report, told Colombian radio station “La W” that the payment was made directly to the man who held the hostages captive and who was in charge of their custody, known as “Comandante Cesar.” Betancourt’s first accounts of her rescue described the “comandante” as a despot, a man who was nevertheless “quickly subdued and stripped naked” by the military officers who made the rescue.

Betancourt, told of the RSR story when she was celebrating her release with supporters in Paris early Friday evening, dismissed the ransom idea, according AFP, the French wire service, which reported, “Betancourt told the Elysee press conference she doubted the theory: ‘Given what I saw during the operation – and frankly, honestly, I don’t think I can be easily fooled – I don’t believe that what I saw was a set-up.’”

Cesar and another rebel were the only two guerrilleros captured by the armed forces the day of Betancourt’s release. Reporter Blassel’s implication is that it was Cesar who received the money. In the past few years, growing numbers of guerrillas have demobilized after receiving large sums of cash from the Colombian government which is seeking to weaken the largest and longest-running armed rebel group in the world. The Colombian media has largely downplayed the report but 2 July, blogs from Colombia were already speculating on this version of events.

The editor of RSR’s foreign desk, Pierre Bavaud, according to Iran’s network PressTV said “the money was a bribe to incite two of the hostages’ guards to betray the group, rather than a ransom paid to Farc.”

The release for payment theory, however, is quickly catching on. Colombian President

Alvaro Uribe has been looking for popular support for a constitutional reform that would allow him to be elected to a third term. Uribe, through a plebiscite, already changed the Colombian constitution to be able to serve a second term, but under current legislation he is barred from re-election. His political platform: his hard-line position against the Farc rebel group who held Betancourt.

According to RSR the United States “was behind” the ransom payment. Three American contractors were released with Betancourt and 11 Colombian soldiers and police officers, some of whom had been kidnapped more than 10 years ago. However, Colombian General Freddy Padilla says the Swiss radio report is nothing more than an “ill-intentioned rumour” that looks to overshadow the “triumph” of Colombian intelligence and military.

Before Betancourt returned to “her other family”, France, Friday afternoon, the Elysee Palace had denied knowing of or participating in any ransom payment. The three American hostages, Keith Stansell, Thomas Howes and Marc Gonsalves, flew directly to a military base in San Antonio, Texas and have not yet spoken publicly. The US government acknowledges helping the Colombians with intelligence but it has not responded to the most recent news reports.

Betancourt was abducted in 2002 while she was campaigning for president and running against Uribe, the current Colombian president. The Americans were captured in 2003 when their drug surveillance plane crashed in the jungle.

Related international media story links, but note that Friday evening few international media, such as the BBC and French broadcast companies, were reporting this new possible angle:

Guardian, UK “Betancourt rescue signals Farc defeat,”

Reuters (no mention of ransom) “Colombia denies paying ransom,”

Thaindian News The ICRC on its site denies it played a role in the release, given the official report that the rebels were duped with a story of humanitarian aid workers taking the hostages.

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