

“Operation Jaques”

The Rescue of Ingrid Betancourt

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“Operation Jaques” was an audacious raid on 2 June, 2008 by Colombian military forces to free fifteen hostages held by FARC. While hailed by many as a success, it also raises concerns for humanitarian agencies working in Colombia and in remote areas of surrounding nations, due to the use of the symbols of the ICRC as a cover by the military forces involved.

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Summary of the Security Situation in Colombia

Weakened by corruption, insurgency and narco-trafficking



Colombia is a divided state, rich in resources which benefit a small urban elite, while the majority of its citizens remain poor. Despite boasting some of the strongest democratic traditions in South America, the country is plagued by long running insurgencies who have damaged democratic institutions through campaigns of murder, extortion and kidnapping.

Battles between left wing insurgent groups (FARC-EP and the ELN) and right-wing “self defense” organisations (AUC) had been particularly damaging to Colombian society, although the ELN has in recent years shrunk nearly to the point of irrelevancy, and the AUC was “decommissioned” between 2002 and 2006 through an agreement with the government.

Insurgency in Colombia has largely been funded through criminal enterprises such as the production and trafficking of cocaine and heroin. Narco-trafficking has also had the effective of increasing corruption amongst the judiciary and law enforcement.

Kidnapping has also been a lucrative source of funding for insurgent groups, particularly FARC, who use Colombian hostages as bargaining chips to gain the release of jailed guerrillas, but use international victims as sources of income. FARC is estimated to be holding over 600 kidnap victims.

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FARC***Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia***

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FARC (or FARC-EP) are the largest and the oldest insurgent or terrorist group in South America, having been founded in 1964 and likely numbering between 4000 – 8000 members. Originally formed as the military wing of the Colombian Communist Party, the link with that group was severed in the 1980s over FARC's involvement with the cocaine trade.

FARC's stated aims are to install a Marxist-Leninist government in Colombia, in order to oppose Western imperialism, privatization of natural resources, and oppression of the rural poor. Critics cite its involvement in the drugs trade, routine use of landmines, and use of "terrorist" tactics as having discredited its commitment to any meaningful ideology.



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“Operation Jaques”

A well executed deception

The location of a large group of important hostages was revealed to Colombian military intelligence by a mole planted within FARC, and then confirmed by surveillance operations using a mix of reconnaissance troops and electronic surveillance devices over a period of 4-5 months. They were being held in an austere camp along the Apaporis River in the Guaviare department of central Colombia. This area has long been considered a FARC stronghold. The rebels holding the hostages were convinced that the FARC leader, Alfonso Cano, had ordered the hostages moved to a new location, as had happened a number of times since their capture.



Colombian military forces, disguised as a party composed of four humanitarian workers, two journalists and two rebels, arrived at the FARC camp in two Mi-17 helicopters, painted red and white, with at least one military member wearing fake ICRC logos. Similar legitimate movements of hostages had taken place in the past, under the auspices of the actual ICRC.

The hostages were loaded into the helicopters, accompanied by two real FARC, including the local commander known by his *nom de guerre*, “César.”

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Likely Fallout from the Rescue

FARC's Battle to Stay Relevant



This rescue of high profile hostages is the latest in a string of set backs for FARC, including the deaths of key leaders Manuel Marulanda Vélez (“Tirofijo”), Ivan Rios, and Raúl Reyes, and the defection of female guerilla leader “Karina.”

FARC's current estimated troop strength is significantly lower than the estimated high of 16,000-18,000 in 2001. President Uribe's ongoing counter-insurgency efforts appear to be effective, and FARC is losing the ability to influence events within the country.

FARC, however, remains extremely well funded through narcotics trafficking, and so cannot yet be discounted. It is quite possible that the FARC leadership, anxious to reassure supporters that it remains relevant in the face of recent problems, will initiate high-profile operations intended to reassert FARC's power.

These operations could include terrorist attacks against soft targets in urban areas, as well as a resurgence of operations in rural areas from which FARC draws much of its support. It is also possible that any such actions by FARC could provoke a backlash, both in the popular perceptions of Colombians, as well as from Colombia's increasingly effective security forces.

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Potential Impact on Humanitarian Operations

The Blurring of Lines



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Given FARC's likely reaction to recent events, serious consideration must be given to matters of security by all humanitarian agencies working in Colombia. With the possible targeting of urban centres, as well as increased guerrilla operations in rural areas, programme activities must be conducted with good security practice in mind. This has an impact on staff workloads, as well as possibly incurring costs for training and equipment to meet basic security standards.

More troubling, perhaps, is the impact that the methods used by Colombian security forces could have on humanitarian space. Disguising security forces as humanitarian workers in order to gain the trust of FARC guerrillas raises the potential perception in future that *any* humanitarian workers could be security forces. This limits the acceptance of humanitarian activities in areas with a FARC presence, and may lead to activities by FARC to actively discourage aid work in areas where they are operating. It also colours the perception of legitimate activities by humanitarian agencies, such as the collection and analysis of information relating to their safety and security, which could be misread as espionage using humanitarian work as a cover. In other contexts, such as Afghanistan, where perceptions of aid work has been distorted by military activities, it has been nearly impossible to repair the damage done. Given the global coverage of this event, there is potential impact for humanitarian agencies around the world.

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Recommendations



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- Humanitarian agencies should ensure that they express their concerns with the use of humanitarian “covers” by security forces, outlining the potential problems caused by such activities. If possible, this message should be conveyed collectively by the community – both in Colombia and elsewhere.
- Information on potential threats, as well as indicators of changing perceptions of humanitarian action, should be shared widely between agencies and discussed on an ongoing basis.
- Agencies working in areas where FARC is known to be present should carefully consider possible perceptions of their activities, and work to limit any actions that could be seen as a threat to FARC or its interests.
- Agencies working in areas where FARC is present should give consideration to a possible increase in the targeted mine threat, a tactic FARC is known to employ.
- Given possible FARC attacks in urban centres, basic security procedures should be implemented to reduce the vulnerability of agencies to such attacks, including the potential of being affected as collateral damage.
- Visits to likely targets, such as public buildings, should be limited.
- Office staff should be alerted to the potential IED threat, and given potential threat indicators to watch for.
- All staff, particularly internationals, should be briefed on the kidnap threat, and should take personal security measures to limit their vulnerability to kidnap attempts.

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About Safer Access



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A network of humanitarian safety expertise.

Safer Access is a network of humanitarian safety expertise formed to better enable the provision of humanitarian and development aid. It is our overall objective to improve the capacity of relief and development organisations working in insecure and complicated environments to deliver life-saving assistance to those most in need.

Our work is first and foremost beneficiary-focused, innovative and aims to have an impact across the aid sector. Our belief is that the best way to ensure continued access to beneficiaries in even the most complex and fluid situations is for organizations to institutionalize effective security planning and procedures from the outset. Our intent is always to teach and facilitate best practises – practices which both safeguard staff security while also enabling access to those most in need. Our passion is to help enable safer and more effective operating practices, from those employed in management to those used by the teams in the field

We understand and are experienced in the challenges that aid workers, both national and international, face everyday. Safer Access is a platform for the collection and distribution of expertise and information to those that need it most. To that end, we are committed to the free and open sharing of critical information – including analysis and best practices – amongst humanitarian and development organisations so as to enable them to better manage their operating risks.

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Should you have any questions regarding this report, or about what Safer Access can do to help you achieve your goals in difficult operating environments, contact us at enquiries@saferaccess.org or visit our website at www.saferaccess.org.



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