

## Brazil Lends Helicopter to Rescue FARC's Colombian Hostages

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With the help of Brazil a Colombian soldier and three police officers were released from captivity by Marxist guerrillas Sunday night, completing the first stage of a three-step release of hostages.

A Brazilian Red Cross helicopter carrying police officers Walter Lozano, Alexis Torres and Juan Fernando Galicia and soldier William Dominguez landed at an airport in Villavicencio, southeast of Bogotá, shortly before 7 p.m. Sunday.

The men - some of whom had been held for several years, the Red Cross said - waved as they stepped off the chopper and were met by well-wishers carrying white flowers.

Many of those who greeted the men were from Colombians for Peace, the group that initiated the hostage release.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which has been battling the government for decades, handed the men over to the Red Cross earlier Sunday.

The Colombian government says FARC is still holding about 700 captives. But many analysts see this week's planned release of a total of six hostages as the first step toward an eventual peace accord with the government.

The rebels announced the hostage release December 21. A Colombian delegation led by Senator Piedad Cordoba, who brokered a previous hostage release in 2007, left Friday for Brazil to make final arrangements.

On Tuesday, Cordoba's delegation is scheduled to travel to another site designated by the FARC to pick up the governor of the Meta state, Alan Jara, who was abducted in 2001.

The delegation then will receive instructions from FARC on how and where to proceed in the third and final leg Wednesday to collect Sigifredo Lopez, a former official in the city of Valle del Cauca, who was kidnapped in 2003.

The Colombian government has recently stepped up pressure on the rebels, offering rewards to the guerrillas if they surrender and free their hostages. Earlier this month, two guerrillas fled their camp deep in the jungles of southern Colombia, bringing along two kidnap victims - a 14-year-old boy and a male adult who were kidnapped in December.

A journalist accompanying the mission reported that military flights over the jungle had complicated and delayed the handover. The Colombian government called the allegations unfounded. The hostages are among six captives the FARC said it would release this week.

Later Monday, the rebels are expected to release Alan Jara, a former governor kidnapped in 2001. Former lawmaker Sigifredo Lopez is expected to be freed on Wednesday. Lopez was abducted in 2002.

The FARC is Colombia's most powerful rebel group. It has been designated as a terrorist organization by Colombia, the European Union and the United States.

Last year, the FARC was dealt a blow when government soldiers posing as members of a humanitarian group freed 15 prominent hostages, including French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt and three American citizens.

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