

Colombian president halts talks with Farc rebels after general kidnapped

Efforts to end 50 years of war in crisis after Rubén Darío Alzate captured along with military official and lawyer

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Ruben Dario Alzate was captured after disembarking from a boat. Photograph: Army press office/AFP/Getty Images

Colombia's president, Juan Manuel Santos, has suspended peace talks with leftist Farc rebels following the kidnapping of a general in a remote jungle region, putting the future of the process to end the country's 50-year-old war in jeopardy.

Gen Rubén Darío Alzate, who heads the Titan task force in the Pacific department of Chocó, was taken on Sunday afternoon by members of the Farc, along with another military official and a civilian, in a small village close to the provincial capital of Quibdó.

Santos ordered a massive search and rescue operation to locate and free the hostages while at the same time suspending peace talks with the Farc, which were scheduled to being a new round in Havana on Tuesday. “The talks are suspended until these people are released,” he said in a statement early on Monday morning.

“This kidnapping is completely unacceptable,” the president said. “The Farc is responsible for the life and the security of these three people.” The defence ministry said it had contacted the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to ask it to intercede with the Farc to ensure the safety of the hostages and try to secure their release.

Alzate was abducted by men armed with rifles after disembarking from a boat in the village of Las Mercedes, according to Juan Carlos Pinzon, the defence minister. An army corporal, Jorge Rodriguez Contreras, and a civilian lawyer, Gloria Urrego were taken along with the general, but a soldier who piloted the vessel escaped and alerted authorities, the minister said.

Alzate was travelling as a civilian and was unaccompanied by his customary bodyguards despite going into an area with a known guerrilla presence. Santos asked his defence minister to explain the reasons behind the apparent breach of security protocol.

Senator Roy Barreras, a member of the congressional peace commission, told W Radio that the general’s excursion “not only put the general’s life in danger but put the life of the peace process in danger”.

Despite two years of talks, and agreements on three of the five negotiating points, no ceasefire has been declared and combat between the two forces, ambushes and guerrilla attacks are frequent. Last week two soldiers were abducted in eastern Arauca province and Santos had warned the Farc that such actions put the peace process at risk.

“If the Farc do not free the general and his companions unconditionally but rather try to negotiate, the process could go into crisis that could lead to a definitive break,” said Jorge Restrepo, director of the Conflict Analysis Resource Centre, a Bogotá thinktank.

Santos has made achieving peace with the Farc the main priority of his presidency but faces criticism from conservative sectors of Colombian society who feel the 8,000 strong guerrilla force should be defeated militarily.

“The abduction will be used by those who criticise the negotiation process to galvanise opposition to the process,” said Restrepo.

Former rightwing president Álvaro Uribe, who leads opposition to the peace process

from the seat he now holds in the Senate, tweeted: “Santos has allowed the Farc to feel they are equal to the armed forces, that’s why terrorists kidnap.”

The Farc had not made any public statements about the general’s abduction nor the suspension of talks. The only other time talks have been suspended since beginning in November 2012 was in August of last year when the Farc balked at a government plan to put any peace deal to a referendum. Negotiations resumed several days later.

A public opinion poll published at the weekend showed that 55% of Colombians support the peace process but 53% are pessimistic about the outcome.

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