

Protesting Terror in Columbia One Million Voices Against FARC



Vision and Motivation

For nearly five decades, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC) has been terrorizing Colombians with bombings, assassinations, hijackings and kidnappings of wealthy Colombians, foreign tourists, and prominent international and domestic officials.^[1] Formed in 1964 in opposition to the

Colombian military's decision to enter the semi-autonomous Communist area that later became known as the "Southern Bloc," FARC claims to stand for the interests of the rural poor. However, the guerrilla army is embroiled in armed conflict and the illegal narcotics trade and is considered a terrorist organization by much of the international community, including the Colombian government, the United States, and the European Union.^[2]

“No more kidnapping,
no more lies,
no more killing,
no more FARC.”

As a guerrilla army, FARC has been characterized by its sometimes brutal hostage-taking tactics, holding innocents in exchange for money or to further their political agenda, and often murdering them if their demands are not met.^[3] It is estimated that the militia is currently holding nearly 800 people hostage.^[4] FARC also controls various areas of the Colombian jungle, including small villages that are under constant siege. The group has also participated in the killing of members of Colombia's indigenous populations,^[5] and continually uses child soldiers.^[6]

The high-profile capturing of Ingrid Betancourt, the Colombian presidential candidate for the Oxygen Green Party, and her nearly seven years in captivity sparked international outrage, but it was not until 2007 that one particular FARC victim provoked widespread Colombian passion and sympathy.^[7] On December 27, 2007,

FARC announced that a boy named Emmanuel, born into captivity by Betancourt's running partner, Clara Rojas, would be released; however, it was later discovered that FARC had abandoned the boy two years earlier.^[8] Emmanuel, who had become severely malnourished as a FARC hostage, was taken to a hospital in 2005 and placed in foster care.^[9]

Oscar Morales, a 33-year-old engineer in the Colombian town of Barranquilla, like many other Colombians, was outraged by FARC's treatment of Emmanuel and its other victims. Emmanuel's story was a catalyst for Morales, prompting him to start a Facebook group called "*Un Millon de Voces contra las FARC*" – "One Million Voices Against FARC" – to break public apathy on terrorism and show that the general public would no longer disregard FARC's kidnappings. Morales used momentum generated by the Facebook page to organize a protest rally where nearly 5 million Colombians protested against FARC, along with thousands more in 165 cities internationally.

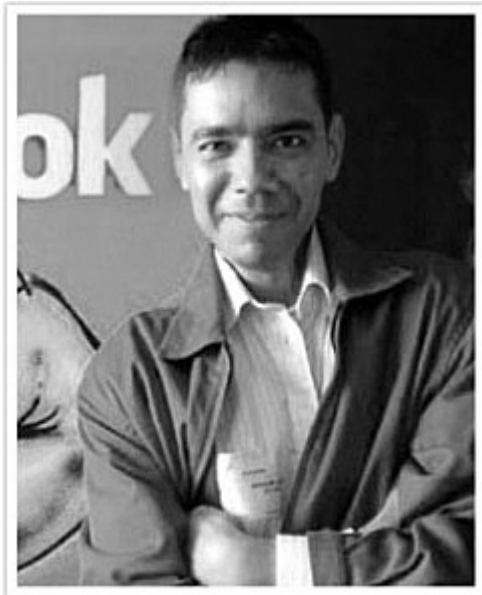
Goals and Objectives

Morales created the Facebook page as a virtual hub for Colombians to express their outrage at FARC's actions.^[10] He described, eight months after the formation of the page, how FARC's power had left the Colombian people "anesthetized" to the kidnappings.^[11] But, according to Morales, Emmanuel's kidnapping and release had sparked outrage and frustration against FARC: "It was due time for the Colombian people to take action against FARC, demonstrating that kidnappings would no longer be ignored."^[12]

The group's motto, "No more kidnapping, no more lies, no more killing, no more FARC," resonated with Facebook users from Colombia and across the rest of the world.^[13] From the moment the group came into being, Facebook users began to join it at an unexpectedly fast pace. "We were gaining thousands of supporters each hour. People wanted their voices to be heard," says Morales.^[14] Inspired by the online support, Morales took his campaign to the streets to demonstrate that the people would no longer tolerate FARC's actions.^[15] In addition to expressing discontent with the

guerrilla force, Morales hoped that the protests would give hope to those who remained in FARC captivity. According to Morales, "Months later, many freed hostages said they'd heard our protest in captivity on a radio and it gave them hope they'd survive."^[16]

Leadership



In 2008, at the age of 33, Morales was an ordinary Colombian citizen outraged by FARC's actions and the Colombian public's disregard for the continuous kidnappings of Colombians, foreign tourists and government officials. Morales knew after his Facebook campaign exploded in popularity that he would need help in organizing a rally against FARC. He emphasized the importance of delegating tasks to members of his inner circle, noting the significance of "recognizing leadership in others [as] they can go beyond your [own] capabilities."^[17] A coalition of community organizers, spanning nearly 50

countries, was formed to help organize the February 4 protests that rocked the world. Leading this campaign had its costs, as Morales has received numerous death threats; he is, however, very pleased with the millions of Colombians who came out for the protest, the opposition to FARC that was expressed, and the already decreasing numbers of FARC members.^[18]

While FARC continues to perpetrate human rights violations, including the use of child soldiers, landmines, gas cylinder mortars and violence against indigenous peoples, Morales continues to fight against it. He founded the One Million Voices Foundation, which works for the release of FARC hostages and general human rights goals in Colombia and also assists in the assimilation of former FARC members back into society.^[19] He has been invited to speak internationally about his experiences using social networking to promote social justice causes.^[20]

Civic Environment

Freedom House describes Colombia in its 2010 Freedom in the World Report as "partly free."^[21] Though violence has overshadowed some recent elections, it decreased significantly in 2002 when Alvaro Uribe was elected president and began Colombia's transition to an electoral democracy. Though the freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally protected, they are, according to the Freedom House report, "restricted in practice by politically motivated and drug-related violence and by the government's inability to guarantee the security of its citizens."^[22] This violent environment made the One Million Voices protest that much more remarkable, considering it was the first open demonstration against FARC. "No one wanted to do demonstrations before," says Bernardo Vargas, several of whose family members had been kidnapped by FARC. "People were afraid. Now that fear is over."^[23]

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Message & Audience

By speaking directly against FARC, rather than generally protesting all those who commit human rights abuses in Colombia, the One Million Voices Against FARC campaign ran the risk of appearing politicized.^[24] Furthermore, since the protests were supported by the Colombian government, some feared that FARC might retaliate with further mistreatment of its hostages.^[25]

Nevertheless, the One Million Voices Against FARC group managed to secure the support of hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook, and millions of protestors in Colombia. Many of the protestors were like Morales himself, sick of FARC's violations against the hostages and eager to



demonstrate that the movement no longer had a base of support. Though many hostage members' families did not come out for the protests, some former hostages, including Clara Rojas, marched proudly.^[26] Internationally, the protestors included thousands of Colombian expatriates who have fled Colombia because of FARC.^[27]

The group initially organized a "National March for Peace" but quickly decided to refocus the tone of the protest to one against FARC itself. Morales says, "Anger was our motivation, but it was the best opportunity to represent our solidarity with the kidnapped."^[28] After advertising the march on Facebook, global supporters began to plan international demonstrations as well. On February 4, 2008, approximately 4.8 million protesters marched through the streets of Colombia, wearing white T-shirts, holding signs bearing the Facebook group's motto or images of hostages, and shouting, "Freedom! Freedom!"^[29] They were joined in over 165 cities around the world, including a reported 10,000 protesters in Madrid.^[30] The protest has been described as the largest anti-terrorism demonstration in the history of the world.^[31]

In a recent interview, Ingrid Betancourt, who escaped captivity during a Colombian military operation, emphasized the importance of such demonstrations of support, saying "I think the press has been astonishing. That kept me alive. That kept my fellow hostages alive. And it's keeping the ones who are still in the jungle alive. There's a lot of controversy about if it is important to talk about the hostages or not... Only, only by naming them, by putting their names out, does it give a sensation of existence and humanity. In the position we were in, treated like animals, like cargo, like objects, I would think it's the most important thing."^[32]

In a country like Colombia, Facebook is an effective means of communicating with large numbers of people, because a significant percentage of the country's population has access to high-speed internet.^[33] Though using Facebook required members to display their names publicly, a tactic that other protest groups had avoided in the past, Morales believed that using their real names gave the group credibility, and their power in numbers convinced more fence sitters to join the movement.^[34] On the day of the protests, some Colombian television stations interrupted their normal broadcasts to air

footage of the protests and of FARC hostages, allowing the protesters' message to reach an even wider audience.^[35]

Outreach Activities

The Facebook group's goal was to reach out to all Colombians opposed to FARC's human rights violations. Once Morales realized the level of international solidarity the movement had garnered, he began to engage the international community and use ambassadors and consulates in various nations to help organize the February 4 protest. Given its local political importance, Morales enlisted the support of the Colombian government, stating that contrary to popular belief, the movement did not start as a government project, but rather that One Million Voices Against FARC went "knocking on the government's door."^[36]



Morales continues to reach out to other individuals and organizations to share his experience using social networking to promote real-world civic activism. He helped create the Latin American Youth Network (Latytud) to "promote freedom and democratic values."^[37] The One Million Voices Foundation also connects with other activist groups; in December 2008, it inspired the Alliance for Youth Movements, a summit in New York City gathering more than 20 youth movements and organizations from around the world that use technology and social networks to promote causes against terrorism, violence, oppression and extremism.^[38]

Morales's work has contributed to the diminishing public support for FARC in Colombia. A 2008 government report stated that the FARC's membership numbers were down to 6,000-8,000 in 2008, from a peak of over 16,000 in 2001.^[39] The massive outcry against FARC on February 4 showed that it no longer had the support of the Colombian people, causing many to desert the guerilla force.^[40] Morales's foundation continues to further the aims of the Facebook group in Colombia by aligning with former FARC members and hostages to raise awareness of the conflict in Colombia,

to encourage members of FARC to leave the organization, and to protest the continued kidnappings and acts of terrorism.^[41]

Learn More

News and Analysis

[Alliance for Youth Movements Official Website.](#)

[Brodzinsky, Sibylla. "Facebook Used to Target Colombia's FARC with Global Rally." Christian Science Monitor. February 4, 2008](#)

["Colombia: FARC Kills 17 from Indigenous Group." Human Rights Watch. February 10, 2009.](#)

[Dickinson, Elizabeth. "Chained in the Colombian Jungle: Interview with Ingrid Betancourt." Foreign Policy. September 24, 2010](#)

[Forero, Juan and Brulliard, Karin. "Anti-FARC Rallies Held Worldwide." Washington Post. February 5, 2008.](#)

[Gerhard, Jan. "Oscar Morales on political engagement with younger generations." Total Politics. February 10, 2010.](#)

[Markey, Patrick. "Colombians Take to the Streets in Huge Anti-FARC March." Reuters. February 4, 2008.](#)

[McDermott, Jeremy. "Colombia's Rebels: A Fading Force?" BBC News. February 1, 2008.](#)

["Millions of Colombians March against Rebels." MSNBC. February 4, 2008.](#)

[Neumayer, Christina and Raffl, Celina. "Facebook for Protest?" 2008. \[PDF\]](#)

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["Oscar Morales." One Young World.](#)

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[Williams, Andrew. "Oscar Morales: How I Used Facebook to Protest against FARC." Metro. February 9, 2010.](#)

["Worldwide Protests against Colombian Kidnapping." Sydney Morning Herald. February 5, 2008.](#)

Books

Betancourt, Ingrid. *Even Silence Has an End: My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle*. Penguin Press, 2010.

Multimedia

["AYM '08 Keynote: Building a Movement against Terrorism." Youtube.](#)

["Anti-FARC on Facebook." Youtube. February 7, 2008.](#)

Footnotes

[1] "Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia." GlobalSecurity.org. June 25, 2008; Hanson, Stephanie. "FARC, ELN: Colombia's Left-Wing Guerrillas." Council on Foreign Relations. August 19, 2009; "FARC." Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

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[4] Markey, Patrick. "Colombians Take to the Streets in Huge Anti-FARC March." Reuters. February 4, 2008.

[5] "Colombia: FARC Kills 17 from Indigenous Group." Human Rights Watch. February 10, 2009.

[6] Pernhaul, Karl. "Children trudge through the mud, train for war in Colombia." CNN. June 9, 2006.

[7] Forero, Juan and Brulliard, Karin. "Anti-FARC Rallies Held Worldwide." Washington Post. February 5, 2008.

[8] "Farc Admit 'Hostage Boy' Not Held." BBC News. January 5, 2008.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Brodzinsky, Sibylla. "Facebook Used to Target Colombia's FARC with Global Rally." Christian Science Monitor. February 4, 2008; Williams, Andrew. "Oscar Morales: How I Used Facebook to Protest against

Farc." Metro. February 9, 2010.

[11] Oscar Morales. "AYM 2008 Keynote: Building a Movement against Terrorism." Youtube. December 8, 2008.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Markey.

[14] Williams, Andrew. "Oscar Morales: How I Used Facebook to Protest against Farc." Metro. February 9, 2010.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Morales.

[18] Williams.

[19] One Million Voices Foundation Official Website.

[20] "Oscar Morales." One Young World.

[21] "2008 Freedom in the World Report: Colombia." Freedom House.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Forero and Brulliard.

[24] Markey.

[25] "Farc Admit 'Hostage Boy' Not Held. "; Forero and Brulliard.

[26] "Worldwide Protests against Colombian Kidnapping." Sydney Morning Herald. February 5, 2008.

[27] Forero and Brulliard.

[28] Morales.

[29] "Millions of Colombians March against Rebels." MSNBC. February 4, 2008.

[30] "Worldwide Protests against Colombian Kidnapping."

[31] "Colombia Marches against Hostage-Takers." The Economist. February 7, 2008.

[32] Dickinson, Elizabeth. "Chained in the Colombian Jungle: Interview with Ingrid Betancourt." Foreign Policy. September 24, 2010

[33] Neumayer, Christina and Raffl, Celina. "Facebook for Protest?" 2008. [PDF]

[34] Williams.

[35] "Worldwide Protests against Colombian Kidnapping."

[36] Morales.

[37] "Oscar Morales."

[38] Ibid.

[39] McDermott, Jeremy. "Colombia's Rebels: A Fading Force?" BBC News. February 1, 2008.

[40] Morales.

[41] "Oscar Morales."