OPINION

A WAY TO SAVE LIVES IN COLOMBIA

By Kevin A. Turner

The continuing guerrilla war and rampant criminality in Colombia challenge even the most optimistic diplomats. To his credit, President Alvaro Uribe has delivered on his campaign pledge to confront armed outlaw organizations aggressively. There remains, however, no light at the end of the tunnel.

As Uribe presses his long-term military strategy, he would do well to balance this with constructive humanitarian initiatives. Indeed, minimizing the impact of the conflict on Colombian society should be his immediate priority.

The most likely avenue for success on the humanitarian front would be an exchange of prisoners/hostages between the government and insurgent groups. Recently, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — FARC, Colombia’s main insurgent group, signaled a desire to pursue exchange negotiations. The FARC is seeking the return of hundreds of imprisoned guerrillas. Similarly, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional — ELN, a disintegrating insurgent force, has indicated its willingness to negotiate.

President Uribe would be wise to champion a humanitarian exchange initiative, first and foremost to save the lives of those currently held captive, but the longer-term implications of an exchange could prove politically rewarding as well.

With this in mind, a publicly declared exchange proposal should be considered, proffered unilaterally by the government. The immediate advantages would be manifold. Uribe could uphold his no-negotiations-without-a-cease-fire stance, as well as the general military strategy of his “democratic security policy.” At the same time as his administration takes command of setting the terms for an exchange, he could single-handedly champion a key humanitarian issue, thereby checking FARC and ELN efforts to increase their political stature through participation in high-level humanitarian talks.

There could be rippling effects internationally, as well. Uribe would be perceived as responding constructively to his European critics, albeit on his own terms. This could provide a window for him to buttress his case for more European support. Were he to include U.S. citizens in his exchange offer, he would gain political capital in Washington.

Furthermore, by taking the lead on a humanitarian issue, he would make it easier for the Organization of American States to justify continued involvement in the faltering demobilization process with the Auto Defensas Unidas de Colombia, a paramilitary organization long considered to be in collusion with government forces.

 Needless to say, such a maneuver would be strategically risky and necessitate intense scrutiny before moving forward. Within the present debate surrounding his controversial anti-terrorism statute, however, Uribe stands to benefit from boldly sponsoring a humanitarian initiative. Moreover, against the backdrop of the impending 2006 elections, the timing of any hostage exchange effort is critical: the time to take a calculated risk is now; otherwise the insurgent groups could drag negotiations into election season and intentionally bury them at the last minute, consequently making the fool of Uribe.

The prospect of saving lives, ultimately, should trump Uribe’s political calculations, and warrants risks regardless of the shape his policies take.

Turner, an analyst of Latin American politics and armed conflict, works at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.