

Prepared to pay to bring her home

Page 1 of 2 [View as a single page](#) 5:00AM Wednesday April 02, 2008
By [Catherine Field](#)

PARIS - Imagine that a politician in Colombia who has dual citizenship with New Zealand has been taken hostage.

Striving to secure this person's release, Wellington offers members of the hostage-taking group - insurgents with a history of violence and drugs trafficking - a new start in New Zealand. There are hints of a ransom to cement the deal.

This in essence is what is happening in France, where President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister Francois Fillon are making desperate attempts to release Ingrid Betancourt, a Colombian-French dual national in the hands of Colombia's FARC far-left rebel group.

Yet, in contrast to the outrage that such a strategy would spark in Anglo-Saxon countries, the French media and public find no controversy in what is offered, and among opposition politicians one only hears praise.

"France is willing to do anything necessary to enable the release of Ingrid Betancourt and accepting FARC militants is part of that effort," Fillon said on Monday. Yesterday, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Pascale Andreani said France was willing "to examine any formula of a kind that will facilitate a solution".

Betancourt, in the hands of the FARC since 2002, is extremely sick, possibly fatally so, with hepatitis B, according to recently released hostages.

Fillon's offer to take in jailed members of FARC is aimed at the group's demand for the release of fighters in exchange for its 39 "political" hostages.

But his offer, which has been endorsed by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, has deserved only the briefest of reports in the French media.

So far, no one has questioned whether his move is morally good or politically astute. The head of the opposition Socialist Party, Francois Hollande, said he supported "any initiative" by Fillon to enable Betancourt's release. "Everything must be tried."

John Pike, of the Washington thinktank GlobalSecurity, says this reaction reflects "different national cultures" when it comes to hostage-taking.

"The Anglo Saxon culture is not to negotiate with the abductors, as it only encourages them," he told the Herald.

"People don't engage in systematic kidnapping without the expectation of a ransom being paid.

"The American tradition is to hunt the kidnappers down, free the hostages and then shoot the kidnappers. That is what they did in the Philippines."



Ingrid Betancourt. Photo / Reuters

France, though, sees the concept of pragmatism differently, focusing on what it takes to end the hostage's suffering, even if this is a grubby business. It has a long record of negotiating with hostage-takers, often in the glare of a powerful publicity campaign by support groups.

Between 1985 and 1987, nine French nationals, mostly journalists and diplomats, were seized in Lebanon by pro-Iranian groups that passed themselves off as Islamic resistance movements.

One died in captivity, the rest were released. It is an open secret that huge sums of money - US\$3 million (\$3.81 million), according to a leaked document in 2002 - were handed over. The Prime Minister at the time, Jacques Chirac, denied flat out that any ransom had been paid.

In Iraq, France paid as much as US\$6 million for the release of journalists Christian Chesnot and George Malbruno in 2004 and US\$15 million for journalist Florence Aubenas and her interpreter in 2005, according to varying press reports.

Asked to confirm these amounts, a former senior agent in the French foreign secret service, the DGSE, said "the figures sound realistic". At the time of Aubenas' release, government spokesman Jean-Francois Cope said: "There was absolutely no demand for money. No ransom was paid."

Nor is France alone in getting its hands dirty. Italy and Germany paid between US\$5 and US\$11 million for the release of their hostages in Iraq, according to figures aired in their parliaments.

In contrast, of the 13 British hostages in Iraq, two have been killed, five have been released and six are unaccounted for. Of the 20 US hostages, 10 have been killed, four were released and one escaped, and five are missing.

"Basically, I think and know that at any time of hostage crisis, when the conclusion is positive, it is because something has been paid," said Claude Moniquet, also a former DSGE operator who is now head of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre thinktank.

"It could be money, it could be arms, it could be sanctuary for rebel movements. I don't think a single political hostage-taking situation has been resolved because the hostage-takers decided to give up and free the hostage.

"The point is clear. If you want your hostage back you have two choices: either use force or pay. I understand from an Anglo-Saxon point of view it could be seen as cynical, but it is realistic, and governments and the intelligence services operate in reality."

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