

Colombian guerrilla group rejects church as mediator

BOGOTA, Colombia – Colombia's largest Marxist guerrilla group said it would not accept the Catholic Church as a mediator in its armed conflict with the government.

Raul Reyes, spokesman for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, told the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina Feb. 14 that the Catholic Church was not acting impartially.

The church "excluded itself (from a mediation role) by favoring the government of (Colombian) President Alvaro Uribe," Reyes said.

Historically, the church has acted as a mediator in efforts to free several of the hundreds of people kidnapped by the guerrillas, as well as in attempts to end the nation's 40-year-old civil war. In recent weeks, the guerrillas released three high-profile hostages to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, leaving the church sidelined. But Chavez's actions produced a political confrontation between Colombia and Venezuela, leading Colombia's president to designate the church as the sole mediator.

In response to the guerrillas' statement, former Colombian President Ernesto Samper said the church should reassess whether it can play a useful role as mediator.

The Colombian bishops' conference has supported recent protest marches condemning the guerrillas and demanding the release of the hundreds of people the guerrillas have captive. Human rights organizations also accuse the guerrillas of planting land mines, recruiting children and forcing peasants from their homes.