

INGRID BETANCOURT'S DETENTION

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Attention has focused in recent days upon the continued incarceration by FARC guerrillas in Colombia of Ingrid Betancourt. Ms. Betancourt is a French-Colombian citizen, and a progressive and principled politician who was kidnapped by FARC in February 2002 while campaigning as a candidate in the Colombian Presidential Election. Ms. Betancourt, her colleague Clara Rojas, and other political aides had been holding talks with the paramilitary organisation in an attempt to end the chaos and bloodshed that have blighted modern day Colombia.

Ms. Betancourt and her colleagues have now been detained for over six years in appalling and inhumane conditions. While some hostage releases have taken place as a result of diplomatic intervention by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, notably the release of Clara Rojas just after Christmas, sadly all the attempts to negotiate the ending of Ms. Betancourt's detention have failed to date. Serious concerns now exist about the deteriorating state of her physical health. Judging by the words written in a poignant letter to her mother, smuggled out in recent months, it appears as if she has also been severely affected mentally by the unspeakable cruelty of the conditions in which she has been held for so long.

Over the last week, protests have been held in different cities across the world, notably in France, calling for the release of Ms. Betancourt.

In Ireland, Seanad Éireann passed a unanimous motion on Thursday calling upon FARC to release Ms. Betancourt and other hostages immediately on humanitarian grounds.

This motion was proposed by the Independent Senators, including myself, and was supported by Senators from all the political parties. It is notable that Sinn Féin Senator Pearse Doherty also spoke in favour of the motion, and specifically called upon all those with any influence to put pressure upon FARC to release Ms. Betancourt immediately. Indeed, Sinn Féin members or officials could conceivably be best placed, considering their common interest in ornithology, to bring direct pressure to bear upon their contacts in the FARC movement.

This initiative was the second such resolution passed in the Seanad in the current term. I had raised the issue of Ms. Betancourt's detention back in September 2007, and had asked Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern for information about the steps being taken by our Government on her case. Following that intervention, a comprehensive all-party motion was agreed in the Seanad in December 2007, in which we called upon the Government to take all possible steps, particularly at EU level, to bring about the release of FARC hostages.

The Seanad has thus played an important role in highlighting this pressing human rights issue. It has been particularly appropriate for Senators to express our collective concern about the detention of a fellow democrat, a courageous politician who was

also formerly a member of the Colombian Senate. The two motions we have passed unanimously emphasise how strongly all of us, both on the Government and opposition sides, feel about the continued detention of Ingrid Betancourt. Everyone feels immense compassion for her two children, her mother, husband and other family and friends who have been campaigning so hard for her release internationally.

By highlighting the Betancourt case in the Seanad, we have also been able to raise awareness more generally about the plight of the many other hostages held by FARC. The release of Ms. Betancourt would, in all likelihood, pave the way for the release of others.

Politicians in Ireland, both members of the Dáil and Seanad, hold our seats because we have had the freedom to campaign, to speak out, and to put our arguments before the electorate. Ingrid Betancourt has fought for these basic democratic rights. Others have resorted to violence and intimidation to silence her. She has paid a high price for her belief in democracy.

Now is a critical time in the negotiations for her release. The mounting concerns about her ill-health, and the consequent renewal of pressure upon the Colombian Government and FARC to bring about her release, may represent the most significant developments yet in the Betancourt case.

The Irish Government, and the EU, must send a strong signal to all sides that some resolution should be found to enable Ms. Betancourt and others to be released. It is imperative that the Minister for Foreign Affairs should use all the diplomatic avenues available to him to support those involved in negotiations with a view to bringing about a resolution.

However, as we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, we should do more than merely support the initiatives of others, like the French, Colombian and Venezuelan Governments. Ireland has a great deal to offer other countries as a model for a successful peace process. I believe our Government should now take its own initiative in this tragic case. This might include dispatching our Minister for Foreign Affairs to Colombia, perhaps with EU backing, to seek to bring about Ingrid Betancourt's release at the earliest possible opportunity. Ingrid Betancourt's life hangs in the balance. Without some breakthrough soon, we are faced with the unthinkable prospect of the passing of a passionate and progressive voice for democracy.