

Family Works to Free a Kidnapped Colombian Author and Senator

By DINITIA SMITH

The family of Ingrid Betancourt, the Colombian presidential candidate and best-selling author who was kidnapped by leftist guerrillas on Feb. 23, are mobilizing an international effort to win her release while urging the government not to rescue her by force for fear her captors will kill her.

Ms. Betancourt's daughter, Mélanie, 16, and her son, Lorenzo, 13, who are in hiding outside Colombia, say they fear for their mother's life. "It's really hard not knowing," Mélanie said in a telephone interview. "There are times that you feel the worst can happen."

Ms. Betancourt, 40, is a senator who has campaigned fearlessly against governmental corruption. Until her abduction, in a

contested area near the southern Colombian town of San Vicente del Caguán, she was a presidential candidate of the left-of-center Oxygen party, which she founded.

Her book attacking drug-tainted political corruption in Colombia made her famous in France, where she is known as Madame Colombia.

A week after her kidnapping another Colombian senator, Martha Catalina Daniels, was abducted, tortured and executed. In addition to Ms. Betancourt, the guerrillas are holding five other members of the Colombian Congress captive.

Ms. Betancourt was taken while trying to enter a former rebel enclave just as the army moved in to reclaim it. Shortly afterward a spokesman for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC (its Spanish acronym), told CNN that the guer-



Agence France-Presse
Ingrid Betancourt

Betancourt's husband, Juan Carlos Lecompte, an architect who works in advertising, said in an interview from Bogotá last Monday, "I don't know why she was kidnapped, because her ideas are very similar to the guerrillas' ideas." She supported peace talks between the government of

rillas would hold her hostage until the government passed a law permitting prisoner exchanges between guerrillas and the military. The guerrillas said they would give the government one year to pass the law. Ms.

President Andrés Pastrana and the guerrillas, Mr. Lecompte said, and had met with the FARC leadership several times.

Ms. Betancourt's book, "Until Death Do Us Part: My Struggle to Reclaim Colombia," is a memoir of her life as the daughter of an aristocratic Colombian family and of her efforts to fight government corruption. It was published in January by Ecco Press, a division of HarperCollins. Last year the book was released in France under the title "The Rage in My Heart," despite the attempts by Colombia's former President Ernesto Samper to stop publication.

In the book, Ms. Betancourt describes him as taking money from drug dealers during his election campaign. On the best-seller list in France for 13 weeks, 4 of them at No. 1, the book sold 120,000 copies.

Mauricio Mesa, a cameraman who was

filming a campaign documentary about Ms. Betancourt and was with her when she was kidnapped, said she and a group of 11 others, including foreign journalists, were on their way by car to San Vicente del Caguán. The town is in a remote area that President Pastrana had ceded to the rebels as a peace gesture and recently retook after peace negotiations broke down. "A military colonel had promised them transportation on one of their helicopters," Mr. Mesa said in an interview from Colombia. President Pastrana, who is a member of the Liberal Party, which Ms. Betancourt opposes, refused to allow her to fly on his helicopter.

Ms. Betancourt and the others decided to proceed on their own, Mr. Mesa said, even though "the authorities let us know of the

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risks of going by road." At about 2 p.m. they arrived at a guerrilla roadblock, said Mr. Mesa.

What happened next is unclear, but apparently a guerrilla was seriously injured after he stepped on a land mine, and Ms. Betancourt tried to help him. The guerrillas then separated Ms. Betancourt and her campaign manager, Clara Rojas, from the others in the party, and took them away in two separate cars. They have not been seen since. The wounded guerrilla and the remaining members of Ms. Betancourt's group were driven away in a third car. The people from Ms. Betancourt's entourage were eventually released.

Ms. Betancourt's former husband, Fabrice Delloye, a French diplomat, said in a telephone interview that three hours after the kidnapping a fax said to have been written by Ms. Betancourt was sent to her father, Gabriel Betancourt, in Bogotá, saying that she was unharmed.

Ms. Betancourt's memoir, "Until Death Do Us Part," reads something like the script for a Costa-Gavras film, or, as Publisher's Weekly has described it, a Tom "Clancy thriller," complete with a glamorous movie-star-like heroine, almost single-handedly fighting corruption in the Colombian government.

The book describes Ms. Betancourt's life as a member of the oligarchy that has governed Colombia for generations, and whose members are interconnected by ties of blood and friendship. The daughter of an ambassador to Unesco, she was raised mostly in Paris in an apartment on the Avenue Foch, where Gabriel García Márquez, Fernando Botera and Pablo Neruda were guests. She and Neruda read each other's poems, Ms. Betancourt says in her book: "I say to him: 'You know, I write poetry too.' 'Really? Well, let's exchange poems.'"

"This becomes a ritual between us," she continued.

Ms. Betancourt's mother, Yolanda, a former beauty queen, eventually separated from her husband and returned to Colombia, winning a seat in Congress.

Ms. Betancourt attended the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris. She also met her first husband in Paris, Mr. Delloye.

After the 1989 assassination of the presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán and the election of President Samper, she returned to Colombia to

fight against the regime. In 1994 she ran for the House of Representatives as a member of the Liberal Party, passing out condoms on the streets of Bogotá with the slogan "The best way to protect us against corruption." She also went on a hunger strike against President Samper.

At one point after she was elected, she made a speech before the Colombian legislature outlining the president's crimes, leaving her audience spellbound, according to the book. "As I return to my seat, something curious and unusual in a Colombian context occurs: the silence continues, an impressive, stupefying silence, as if these men, who are only too prone to violence, are temporarily broken."

Then, in 1998, disappointed at the reform efforts of the new president, Mr. Pastrana, whom she had supported, she founded the Oxygen party and won a Senate seat with a record number of votes. Recent polls

A politician fighting corruption is held by rebels.

showed that she had virtually no chance in the presidential race.

During her career, Ms. Betancourt has railed against right-wing death squads and narrowly missed being assassinated herself. She has received death threats against herself and her family, including on one occasion a Polaroid photograph of a dismembered child. Finally, in 1996, an unnamed man arrived at her office. Ms. Betancourt writes, "Your family is in danger," the stranger says. She continues, "This time I can no longer play games." She sent Mélanie and Lorenzo to live with their father, at that time posted in Auckland, New Zealand.

The decision devastated her, she writes. "Overcome by pain, I wander around the apartment that I bought for them, decorated for them, finding, every door, reminders of them, of their absence." Eighteen months passed before she saw them again. Since then, the children have visited her in Colombia on vacations, and she has communicated with them over the Internet.

"I trust so much her strength," her daughter said in the interview. "I can feel her energy from here."