Family Works to Free a Kidnapped Colombian Author and Senator

By DINTIA SMITH

The family of Ingrid Betancourt, the Colombian presidential candidate and bestselling author who was kidnapped by leftist guerrillas on Feb. 22, 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, Melanie, 16, and her son, Lorenzo, 3, who are in hiding outside Colombia, say they fear for their mother’s life. “It’s really hard not knowing,” Melanie 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 Caguan, she was a presidential candidate of the left-of-center Oxiyen party, which she founded.

Her book attacking drug­tailed 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 Danels, 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 guerrillas would hold her hostage until the government passed a law permitting prisoners to exchange between guerrillas and the military. The guerrillas said they would give the government one year to pass the law.

Ms. Betancourt’s husband, Juan Carlos Lecompte, an architect who works in advertising, said in an interview from Bogota 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 President Andres Pastrana and the guerrillas, Ms. 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 how she was taken from a drug dealer during his election campaign. On the best­seller list in France for 13 weeks, it 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 Caguan. 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 his helicopter,” 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...Continued on Page 3

A politician fighting corruption is held by rebels.

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 Uruguay, she was raised mostly in Paris in an apartment on the Avenue Foch, where Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Fernando Botero 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, Yo­handa, a former beauty queen, eventually separated from her husband and returned to Colombia, winning a seat in Congress.

Ms. Betancourt attended the Institut d’Estudes Politiques de Paris. She also met her first wife in Paris, Mr. Delloye.

After the 1989 assassination of the presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan 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 Bogota with the slogan “The best way to protect us against corruption.” She also won a seat and 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 1996, disappointed at the reform efforts of the new president, Mr. Pastrana, whom she had supported, she founded the Oxiyen party and won a Senate seat with a record number of votes. Recent polls showed that she had virtually no chance in the presidential race.

Shrinking her career, Ms. Betancourt has rallied against right­wing 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 Melanie 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, decorating, cleaning, 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.”