

FARC leader's death brings hope for hostages' freedom

Contributed by Administrator
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Government officials announced Saturday that the founder and leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) -- Manuel Marulanda, alias Tirofijo (Sureshot) -- died in the jungle of cardiac arrest in March.

Senior FARC rebel commander Timoleon Jimenez on Sunday confirmed Marulanda's death and said Alfonso Cano, a longtime ideologue for the group, has replaced him.

Holding out hope that Marulanda's death will result in change was Magdalena Rivas, whose son Elkin Hernandez was abducted by the group more than nine years ago.

"I hope that Señor Alfonso Cano ... will make a humanitarian gesture and that it will be possible for our police and other kidnapped victims who now find themselves in the forest to be freed as soon as possible," she said. Ex-Sen. Luis Eladio Perez, who was held by FARC for seven years before his February release, said he believes a path toward a negotiated solution could be opened for the release of hostages, estimated to number 750. They include politicians like former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, military police and three U.S. citizens.

"The presence of Cano and the presence of the political wing in recent years has made it so that, for the first time, the FARC was beginning to think politically. The proof of that is our liberation," he said.

Echoing his sentiments was Betancourt's sister, Astrid, who said Cano's position as FARC's new leader brought her encouragement, The Associated Press reported.

"The fact that the FARC designated Alfonso Cano, from the political wing more than from the military, seems to us like a signal that they want to go down that path" of negotiation, AP quoted her as saying by phone on Monday.

FARC has insisted the military abandon rebel strongholds in the municipalities of Pradera and Florida in the Valley of Cauca, just east of Cali in western Colombia. "The FARC has to understand that, though there will be no evacuation, there are some solutions through which they can advance very rapidly," Perez said.

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