

Ingrid Betancourt

«There is a Monster inside Every One of Us» (English translation)

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Von Alex Baur

In an interview with the Weltwoche, former FARC hostage Ingrid Betancourt talks about how she survived six years in the jungle, why despite the brutality she suffered she does not hate her tormentors, and how she is coming to terms with her newly obtained freedom.

Ms. Betancourt, you were held prisoner for over six years in the jungle under inhuman conditions. What gave you the strength to persevere?

Family. Knowing that there are people who are waiting for you. My family is also my most important source of support today. Though it is not easy. My liberation was a big surprise. At first you're overcome by joy and then you suddenly realize: everyone has gone on with their lives and you are no longer a part of them. It's a shock. Now I have to rebuild my own life, to start over again from zero. But nonetheless: when I get up in the morning, the first thing I do is to give thanks that I'm still alive. And free. One of my most important tasks now is to fight for those who are still being held hostage.

Does one feel anything like guilt vis-à-vis the hostages who have not been released?

I myself experienced the release of other hostages several times. One is happy for their good fortune and doesn't have any concrete expectations. But those who have been freed know the suffering of those who are left behind and they have the opportunity to inform the public. It is not a matter of guilt. It's an obligation.

When you entered Colombian politics over ten years ago, you sent your children to live in France for security reasons. Then you were kidnapped. Looking back: was worth it?

I thought at the time that politics was only an episode in my life and that I would soon return to my "real" life and to my family. In politics I said things that many people thought but no one said openly. I tried to approach old problems in a new way. But as to your question: No, I don't regret anything, even if I'm sorry that my family had to suffer so much on my account. Thus it's completely clear that for me family comes first now. I don't know whether or how I'll ever go into politics again.

You were kidnapped in February 2002 on the way to San Vicente del Caguán: an area that was considered dangerous. Some people have accused you of being reckless.

There was a very tense situation in San Vicente at the time. Following the breakdown of the peace negotiations, local politicians had become exposed and their lives were in danger. My role was to serve as a human shield. I underestimated the danger that I was running. But otherwise I have no need to reproach myself for what I did.

Does freedom mean something different for you today than earlier?

Yes, definitely. During these more than six years, freedom became as important for me as oxygen. Yesterday, I was looking at a book in which freedom was discussed. Even though it is written by a dear friend of mine, I was soon so annoyed that I had to put it

down – it all seemed so theoretical to me. Freedom is something tremendous – but when you are free, you hardly notice it. Freedom is the very key to human dignity.

Would you also say that this is true on the political level? South America is today at a crossroads. Various caudillos want to revive the Cuban model that had long been regarded as passé.

I'll answer you using a metaphor. The day before yesterday I was in a super market. I was in a great hurry and then suddenly I found myself standing in front of a box of Häagen-Dazs ice cream. First I thought about all the calories. But then this ice cream – which during all those long years in the jungle was totally out of reach – took on an enormous importance for me. I had to have this Häagen-Dazs and precisely this brand, not any other. What I want to say by this is that freedom also means that I decide for myself whether I want to get something apparently unreasonable or not. No one has the right to stop me from eating this stupid, definitely unhealthy Häagen-Dazs ice cream.

Your tireless striving for freedom is like a theme that runs through your entire life. In the internal e-mails of your kidnappers, the FARC guerrilla, you are described as a rebel who never submitted and who never let her will be broken. How do you explain this?

(After a long silence) My relationship to the FARC was very difficult. (Hesitates) The way that the FARC treats their hostages is so inhuman – who wouldn't rebel against it?

Most of the hostages made compromises with their captors.

(Hesitates) I respect what my comrades have done. Everyone tries in their own way to preserve some dignity – in a desperate situation in which one has to put up with permanent humiliations, an environment in which there are no laws, in which one is exposed to the changing moods of one's guards. I can't judge others.

That sounds like you're being diplomatic. In captivity, your friendship with one of your closest companions, Clara Rojas, evidently came to an end. Rojas had become close to the hostage-takers.

(After long reflection) It's painful for me to talk about these things. It's still too soon. (Holds back tears) It was all very complicated. I'm sorry. For the moment, I can't tell you any more about it.

But you can be proud of yourself! You showed incredible strength. You never let yourself be broken, right up to the last day. The rescue operation almost failed because you didn't want to allow your hands to be tied.

(Laughs) Yes, every day I had little fights with the guards. It was nothing rational, it was just a reflex. I never accepted my situation, but I had to come to terms with it. It was a very difficult process. But I've come out of it with a clear conscience – I never accepted the unacceptable.

In Europe alone, over 200 support committees were created to militate for your liberation. Were you aware that you had given rise to such a movement around the world?

No. It was an unbelievable surprise for me when I discovered upon my release everything that people had done for me. In fact it still is. You live isolated in the jungle for nearly seven years. You're freed, one hour later you board an airplane and then the whole world is staring at you. It was an enormous shock. Thanks to the radio we knew that people were fighting for us on the outside, but I would have never been able to

image the dimensions. Freedom burst upon me with incredible force. But it's a wonderful feeling to experience such solidarity – it's the positive side of globalization.

Wasn't this wave of solidarity a double-edged affair? It increased your value for the kidnapers exponentially – and thus lengthened the period of your captivity.

Undoubtedly, there has to be a debate on the issue. But I don't see things that way. I believe that the media, above all the media in Europe, saved my life. I tried to escape five times. Five times they captured me. The FARC executed other hostages after escape attempts. In my case, they chained me to a tree for days – but they let me live. I can thank the media for that. Given our prominence, the FARC couldn't afford to murder me or my companions; since at some point, despite all the disinformation that they spread, this would have come to light.

What are the FARC trying to achieve with the hostages?

The hostages are human shields and a means of putting pressure on the government. By using the hostages, the FARC stake out a presence on the international political stage. For us that was a form of life insurance, because international attention was always very important for the FARC. At least there was that. It made an inhuman situation somewhat more human.

Is this also the case for the less prominent hostages?

Luis Eladio was with me on one of my escape attempts. He said to me: "If they catch us both, they'll kill me and they'll let you live." I told him: "No, because if they kill you, I'll tell about it. They don't want to risk that." And that's how it was.

You had a close friendship with the former Senator, Luis Eladio Pérez. When he was released at the beginning of the year, what feeling predominated for you: joy for him or sorrow over the loss of a friend?

That was a very difficult moment. One of the guards gave us three minutes to say goodbye to one another. I know that Luis was experiencing the same terrible dilemma: immense joy about his release and at the same time horror at having to leave us behind. We didn't know if we would ever see one another again.

Didn't it also give you hope that you would yourself soon be freed?

No, on the contrary. A short time later the FARC commander Raúl Reyes was killed. This was then followed by the death of Marulanda and yet another FARC capo. I thought I was going to spend another ten years in captivity.

Did you keep a journal?

At the beginning, during the first few years, I filled up whole notebooks. But then the FARC took everything away from me and read every line. For a time, I started writing again and then I burnt everything. Then I stopped altogether. Except for the letter that I wrote to my mother last November. In that case too, I knew that they would read everything and censor what I wrote. I was never allowed to write to my children.

The letter to your mother gives the impression that by the end of 2007 you had given up on life.

I'd lost hope of ever being released, but not my faith in God. I'd thought about the possibility of not surviving: I was seriously ill and death seemed to me like a viable form of liberation. I didn't want to oblige my children to be on stand-by for another ten years. I thought that my death would be a kind of redemption for everyone. But then the

reactions of my family to the letter gave me the strength to live again.

The FARC gave you no opportunity to write to your family members before then?

That's how it was. Human life has no value for the FARC. They only do what serves their purposes. Hostages are just a means of exchange for them. Letters to family members were proof that we were still alive. Otherwise, they were a risk. The FARC talk all the time about humanitarian concerns, but in reality they despise the latter as a sign of weakness.

But you could at least hear your family?

Yes, on the radio: on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Half of Colombia was listening too, but we didn't think about that at all. Those were the sweetest moments. When we were moved from one camp to another, however, we didn't have any radio for weeks or sometimes months. That was difficult. As consequence, I missed the marriage of my sister.

A lot has happened in the world in the last seven years. I imagine, there's a lot of catching up to do.

Yes, of course: there are some gaps to be filled here and there. I needed help getting accustomed to the new computer programs, for instance. But thanks to the shortwave radio I was able to follow developments around the world. I just wasn't able to put any pictures together with the news. For example, Barack Obama looks much younger than I imagined.

And your children? The teenagers have become adults in the meanwhile.

In the weeks since my liberation, my life has revolved around my two children. We have a lot of catching up to do. We've been systematically reconstructing the years that we missed using report cards, photos and the like.

Do you believe that you yourself are a different person today than you were seven years ago?

In the jungle, I lost my fear. I've become more spiritual, less attached to material things. I believe that I am a truly free person today. I don't feel any need for vengeance.

Isn't that a bit idealistic? After everything that the FARC did to you, you must have some desire for revenge.

As a hostage, you have two choices: either you accept your lack of freedom or you take refuge in a sort of inward, spiritual escape. True freedom is when you no longer let yourself be overwhelmed by your emotions, when your tormentors can no longer affect you. Then you don't hate these people any more, you are indifferent to them.

Were there decent guerrilleros?

During my time in captivity, I met maybe 300 guerrilleros. Of those, there were maybe three or four who showed sympathy. In the jungle, where there is no form of control and no law, and under the pressure exerted by the group, anyone can become a monster. Anyone. Even though everyone knows that no good can come from cruelty, humiliation, murder and torture.

But there were the other sides of the experience too. Luis Eladio, for example, selflessly took care of you for weeks, as you were lying near death with hepatitis.

You're absolutely right. God always provides for contrasts: where there is the most awful horror, you will sometimes also find the greatest good.

Following your rescue, a Swiss radio station broadcast a rumor according to which the entire operation was supposed to have been a farce: the Americans, the report claimed, had bought off the two FARC chiefs César and Gafas for \$20 million.

Look, I don't know everything that might have gone on behind the scenes. What I can tell you with certainty, however, is that the soldiers who freed us risked their lives. They were faced with a detachment of some 500 heavily-armed guerrilleros: people who are used to killing and who would have caused a bloodbath on the slightest provocation. The guerrilleros were definitely not in on the operation. Had one of the chiefs been bought off? I didn't see César when he was overpowered in the helicopter, since he was behind me. But I did see Gafas. He was right in front of me and his face was contorted with fear. The poor guy looked like somebody who was going through hell – just as I was being released from hell.

Apparently someone wore a symbol of the Red Cross. Did you notice that?

The situation was very confused. What we hostages saw was an international commission, which, we had been told, was supposed to move us to a different camp. I didn't notice the ICRC symbol. The first thing that caught my eye were two supposed TV reporters. As far as I know, the Red Cross does not usually turn up with cameras and a microphone.

President Álvaro Uribe has been nearly unanimously criticized by the European press as a neo-liberal hardliner. In Colombia, on the other hand, he enjoys unparalleled popularity. What do you think about the Uribe "phenomenon"?

Things are never totally white or totally black. I think that Uribe has made Colombians trust their state again. He has united the nation behind him. These are nearly Herculean accomplishments, which hardly anyone thought were possible before him. In the sphere of day-to-day politics, however, there are things that I would do differently.

The hostage rescue was the crowning achievement of Uribe's politics.

It was a daring, intelligent operation: simply perfect. Everything was right about it: from point of view of psychology, the military preparation, the use of intelligence. But it was a coup that involved enormous expenditure and effort, and without the pressure coming from Europe, I don't think it would have been pulled off without a single drop of blood being shed. In the past, hostage rescues were always paid for in blood. We lived in a sort of constant panic about a possible military operation. The problem is that our rescue operation can't be done again. I believe now more than ever that the liberation of the remaining hostages can only be achieved by way of dialogue. And that can only happen in turn with international support. Terrorism is an international phenomenon.

Dialogue sounds good, but Colombia has not had a good experience with this approach. In Cagúan, where you were kidnapped, the government made concessions to the guerrilla. The result was that there were more kidnappings than ever before, since the extortion attempts had paid off.

In the case of a kidnapping, the saving of human life is what is of paramount importance. That's the price that we have to pay for civilization. That's why dialogue is necessary. The decisive point is that everyone has to know that there can be no impunity. Whoever crosses the red line must know that – negotiations or no negotiations – sooner or later he will be held accountable.

Ingrid Betancourt

The second daughter of a career diplomat and his politician wife, Ingrid Betancourt Pulecio was born on 25 December 1961 in the Colombian capital of Bogotá. She spent part of her childhood in Paris, where she later would study political science at the elite Institut d'études politiques. The future French prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, was one of her fellow students. In 1981, Betancourt married the French diplomat Fabrice Delloye, with whom she had two children. In 1990 the couple divorced. Six years later, she married the architect Juan Carlos Lecompte, the co-founder of the Colombian Green Party Oxígeno (PVO). In 1994, Betancourt was elected to the Colombian parliament as a candidate of the PVO. In 2002, she was a candidate for the Colombian presidency. During the electoral campaign, the candidate was kidnapped by the narco-guerrilla group, the FARC. She was held in captivity for over six years. In July 2008, a special force of the Colombian Army freed Betancourt and fourteen other hostages in a daring coup.