

'Consider public security when freeing hostages'

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By Rebecca Anna Stoil, Internal Security Correspondent

It is entirely permissible for governments to negotiate with terrorists for hostages' release, but only after "putting into the balance the security of the rest of the population," Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos Calderon, a former hostage himself, said Thursday.

As vice-president of a country plagued by a terror group that thrives on hostage-taking, Calderon has a rare perspective on hostage negotiation with terrorists. Calderon, now a member of the Colombia First Party, was a prominent journalist with a leading Colombian newspaper in 1990 when he was kidnapped by Pablo Escobar, then leader of the Medellín drug cartel. Calderon and a handful of other journalists were held hostage for nearly eight months as Escobar demanded that then-president Cesar Gaviria promise not to extradite drug traffickers to the United States.

After his release, Calderon became a passionate advocate for the rights of hostages and their families, founding País Libre (Free Nation), an organization to assist the victims of kidnapping and their families. A year after the 1999 landmark march during which millions of Colombians took to the street to demand an end to kidnapping and terrorism, Calderon was forced to flee his native country after receiving multiple death threats by the Colombian terror group FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia).

"Negotiations with terrorists cannot undermine security for the rest of the population, and therefore, when considering the release of hostages, one must look at the margins - where you can add something or take it away in order to secure releases," Calderon told *The Jerusalem Post*.

He said that his government had recently released 127 FARC members as part of a negotiated agreement, and that one option was the relocation of certain terrorists to a willing third-party country. Certain European countries, he said, were currently working with Colombia to try to secure such arrangements.

In many of the Colombian cases, the option for non-negotiated military rescue operations has been deemed near impossible - the country contains 540,000 square kilometers of jungle, an area over twice the landmass of the United Kingdom and where FARC operatives hide together with their hostages.

He noted that it was very difficult to compare the Israeli and Colombian situations because they are "very different," but did emphasize that Colombia has learned from the Israeli experience.

"We've learned that states should not be afraid," he said, and added that looking at the Israeli example also served to reinforce the importance of maintaining high morale in the armed forces.

During a conference of the International Center for Radicalization and Political Violence last week in London, Calderon blasted European NGOs and even governments for giving FARC and other terror groups a leg up.

"I cannot tell you how demoralizing it is sometimes for the people of Colombia to watch European NGOs or even members of certain parliaments who silently watch when we suffer from indiscriminate attacks, bombings, kidnappings and forced recruit of minors," Calderon said in a speech before a gathering that included members of the European Parliament as well as policy advisers and academics.

"Some groups - a minority - in developed societies apparently lighten their feelings of guilt by campaigning on behalf of armed groups promoting their romantic image of freedom fighters fighting for justice,"

he added. "Politicians who believe themselves to be progressive justify the actions of these groups by alleging social inequalities and government failures."

Calderon described this support as a factor encouraging political violence, saying that it "encouraged" and "nourished" terror when "sectors in the international community are timid in their condemnation, weak in the fight against them and openly sympathetic..."

"As long as people perceive that there are first and second class democracies and first and second class types of terrorists, we will not be able to rid the world of this violence," he said, advocating that terror targeting civilians should be condemned universally.

"In this globalized world there must be no fertile ground or hiding places for terrorists."