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OUR TURN : Colombian rescue holds two messages

EDITORIAL

Independence Day 2008 held special meaning for Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes and Keith Stansell. After more than five years as hostages abroad, the three American military contractors were back in the United States - free, in San Antonio.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, seized the men when the drug surveillance plane they were aboard went down in the jungle in 2003. In a daring operation last week, Colombian army commandos rescued the Americans and twelve other hostages, including a former Colombian presidential candidate.

In its effort to topple the Colombian government and install a socialist regime, the FARC has taken as many as 700 hostages in Colombia. Many of them have been in captivity much longer than Gonsalves, Howes and Stansell. The FARC depends on revenues from the drug trade, in addition to ransoms, to fund their revolutionary movement.

That's the kind of enemy democratically elected President Alvaro Uribe faces. And last week's dramatic rescue is emblematic of the progress his government has made in defeating narcoterrorism and in healing some of Colombia's economic and social wounds.

The leadership on Capitol Hill would do well to take note. Democrats continue to hold hostage a free-trade agreement that would benefit both the United States and Colombia.

In theory, their opposition is based on criticism that Uribe hasn't been diligent enough in his efforts to stop the slayings of trade unionists - never mind that by some measures, those murders have dropped by more than 75 percent since 2001.

In reality, it's an election year payoff to union bosses in the United States who stand firmly opposed to any and all free trade agreements, no matter how much they might benefit American and Colombian workers.

San Antonio leaders should also take note. According to a report in the Express-News, Army South and BAMC had been preparing to receive the captured Americans for years.

That preparation included training for treatment of possible battlefield wounds received during the course of the rescue operation. No doubt, some of that training took place at Camp Bullis.

Camp Bullis is essential to the mission of the military in San Antonio.

If the community and the environment no longer support the mission, national security will dictate that the military move it somewhere else.

Around the world, people saw images of those three Americans being repatriated in San Antonio. That's the sort of image that the encroachment of development around Camp Bullis threatens to erase.