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Held Captive, yet Clinging to Hope

By LARRY ROHTER

EVEN SILENCE HAS AN END

My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle

By Ingrid Betancourt

528 pages. The Penguin Press. \$29.95.

HOSTAGE NATION

Colombia's Guerrilla Army and the Failed War on Drugs

By Victoria Bruce, Karin Hayes and Jorge Enrique Botero

315 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

For all its horror and injustice, the experience of the political prisoner held in inhuman conditions has often been transformed into compelling literature; just think of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and "The Gulag Archipelago" or novelists like Dumas and Arthur Koestler. Now, almost by accident, Ingrid Betancourt joins that distinguished company with "Even Silence Has an End: My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle."

A Colombian politician of French descent, Ms. Betancourt was taken hostage in February 2002 by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, a left-wing guerrilla group that sustains itself through cocaine trafficking and kidnappings. She became a valuable bargaining chip in the group's decades-long war

with the Colombian government, but, as a member of the country's elite, she was also treated with brutality and contempt by her captors, many of them poor young peasants.

Ms. Betancourt, now 48, seems to have set out to write a straightforward chronicle of her ordeal, and describes the humiliating, mind-numbing daily routine to which she was subjected, as well as her efforts to escape and the punishment inflicted on her when she was caught again. But as the details of fear, hunger, illness, abuse, boredom, hopelessness and physical suffering accumulate over 528 pages, so too do their power and intensity.

"I was thirsty and hungry," she writes of one long, forced trek. "I was cold. My feet were ravaged by enormous blisters that had burst and stuck to my soaked socks. I'd been bitten from head to toe by tiny fleas I couldn't see but I could feel, swarming all over my body. The mud had stuck to my fingers and beneath my nails, swelling them, infecting the skin, which cracked. I was bleeding, and yet I couldn't identify my multiple sores."

At the time she was abducted, at a roadblock, Ms. Betancourt was the presidential candidate of the Green Oxygen Party, and she seems during her captivity to have retained a remarkable sensitivity to the environment around her. Even as she is being marched in chains through the Amazon jungle, one of the most inhospitable places on earth, the harsh beauty of her surroundings moves her to poetry.

"On the nights of a new moon, a spell was cast on the forest," she writes. "In the total darkness of its privation, the ground would be lit with thousands of fluorescent stars, as if the sky had been scattered on the ground." She then relates how she put her "hand under the mosquito net and picked up the phosphorescent nuggets that were strewn across the ground," only to find that they were mundane objects and to see that "their supernatural light disappeared. And yet I only had to put them back on the ground for them to regain their power and light up again."

"Even Silence Has an End," whose title derives from one of Pablo Neruda's poems, is gripping not just for its heart-wrenching portrayal of captivity, but also because of the sharp and useful psychological insights it offers. With her life at stake, Ms. Betancourt proves quite perceptive in analyzing human behavior: the morale-sapping mind games that captives played with one another as well as the strategies she used in hopes of preserving some shred of dignity and keeping her guerrilla adversaries off balance.

“When I heard the guerrillas refer to us as ‘cargo,’ as ‘packages,’ I shuddered,” she writes, explaining her insistence that her captors call her by her name. “These weren’t just expressions. The point was to dehumanize us. It was simpler for them to shoot at a shipment of goods, at an object, than at a human being.”

What “Even Silence Has an End” could use more of is political and military context. It is obvious that Ms. Betancourt could not have been aware of what was going on in the outside world during the years she was held. But an effort to reconstruct that larger picture would help readers to understand better the actions of the FARC, which here often seem utterly illogical and incomprehensible, exercises in sadism for the sheer fun of it.

Ms. Betancourt also emerges as a central figure in “Hostage Nation,” by Victoria Bruce, Karin Hayes and Jorge Enrique Botero, whose focus is precisely the broader guerrilla conflict that has long afflicted Colombia, and the resulting United States-led effort to undermine the FARC through what the book calls “the failed war on drugs.” But her image in that book is considerably less heroic, with some other figures, like a French photographer who was with her when she was kidnapped, complaining that she was “very arrogant and difficult to be around.”

Relations appear to have been particularly strained between Ms. Betancourt and three American hostages, captured when the plane in which they were flying as part of the American-supported drug interdiction program crashed in 2003. Though she writes of forging a close bond based on religious faith with one of them, Marc Gonsalves, she also expresses disdain for what she considers the rank materialism of another, Keith Stansell, an ex-Marine who in turn last year called her “the most disgusting human being I’ve ever encountered” because she supposedly sought and got favored treatment from the FARC.

On fundamental points that go beyond personality conflicts the books also offer clashing views. The three authors of “Hostage Nation,” only one of whom appears to have spent any significant time with the FARC, talk, for example, of how “often, deep familial bonds formed between commanders and the young guerrillas.” But Ms. Betancourt’s 2,321 days of vigilant observation seems to contradict that notion, especially regarding relationships between older male commanders and young, nubile female guerrillas.

“In the FARC, it was frowned upon to turn down a leader’s advances,” she writes. “A girl had to show proof of camaraderie and revolutionary spirit. Women in uniform were expected to assuage the sexual desires of

their brothers in arms.” So “a girl could refuse once, twice, but not three times, or she would be called to order for a lack of revolutionary solidarity.”

“Hostage Nation” seems on firmer ground when it describes how the United States and Colombian governments, the American hostages’ families and the defense contractor that employed them often were working at cross-purposes, perhaps extending their time in captivity. The lessons derived may even be applicable in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places, current and future, where Washington outsources warfare to private contractors.

In July 2008, just when Ms. Betancourt thought her situation most hopeless, deliverance finally came. A Colombian military team, disguised as an “international humanitarian mission,” duped the guerrillas into handing over not only Ms. Betancourt and the three Americans, but also 11 other Colombian hostages, some held for as long as a decade.

The military’s decision to paint red crosses on the helicopters they used in the rescue operation was later criticized by some human-rights groups. But not by Ms. Betancourt and the others:

“My eyes opened to another world,” she recalled of the moment she was told she was free. “I had just been catapulted into life. A rich, intense serenity flooded over me.”