

**French reporter freed by rebels won't abandon covering Colombia's 'invisible conflict'**  
**By Associated Press**  
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SAN ISIDRO, Colombia — A French journalist freed by leftist rebels Wednesday said he had no complaints about his captivity other than its 33-day duration and lamented that Colombia's war is an "invisible conflict" where the poor kill the poor.

Romeo Langlois said he was not embittered, but he criticized the rebels for using his capture for propaganda purposes. They freed him on their movement's 48th anniversary on a specially built stage, hanging pro-peace banners in this remote southern hamlet and organizing a barbecue.

But the rebels and the roughly 2,000 people they convened for the handover to a humanitarian commission coordinated by the International Red Cross applauded vigorously when Langlois said he appreciated how the guerrillas "live in the mud and risk their lives."

"They never tied me up," Langlois, 35, said of his Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia captors. "Rather, they always treated me as a guest. They gave me good food ... They were always respectful."

Langlois looked relaxed and smiled, appearing unbothered by the wound to his left arm suffered during an April 28 attack by rebels on soldiers he was accompanying on a mission to destroy cocaine laboratories. "I didn't need this experience to know the Colombian conflict or to know the rebels. I've been in this a long time," Langlois said when asked what he took away from his captivity, which occurred just a few miles away. "What I take from it is the conviction that one must continue covering this conflict."

He was on assignment for France24 television when captured and has contributed to the newspaper Le Figaro.

It was not immediately known if Langlois, a bachelor who has lived in Colombia for more than a decade, would fly to France to be reunited with his parents.

The FARC, as the rebels are known by their Spanish initials, sent a letter with him for France's new Socialist president, Francois Hollande.

Langlois made no apologies for accompanying the military. The rebels had criticized him in an early May communique as lending himself to government propaganda by doing so.

"I hope the army doesn't stop taking people to conflict zones, and let's hope the rebels also take journalists with them to show the daily life of their combatants because this conflict isn't being covered," Langlois said.

Three soldiers and a police officer were killed in the morning-long firefight that saw Langlois captured. A guerrilla commander, Calacho Mendoza, said Langlois was lucky because an AK-47 bullet entered the reporter's left arm above the elbow and exited the forearm without damaging bone or cartilage.

Langlois said he watched a sergeant die, just a meter away, during the battle.

Before fleeing toward the rebels, the journalist shed his helmet and body armor that the military had provided. Mendoza said insurgents initially thought because of the military garb that Langlois could be a U.S. or Israeli military fighter.

Mendoza publicly apologized Wednesday that the FARC initially referred to the Frenchman in a communique as "a prisoner of war."

The delegation that received Langlois included French diplomat Jean-Baptiste Chauvin, former Colombian Sen. Piedad Cordoba and the Red Cross country chief, Jordi Raich. It arrived on rutted dirt roads from the state capital of Florencia in Red Cross vehicles and lunched with the rebels and Langlois on chicken and rice after the handover ceremony.

The group left shortly before nightfall, its departure slightly delayed as Langlois awaited a backpack including the diary he kept while captive.

Residents of San Isidro, which lacks running water and electricity and lives off cattle and coca, slaughtered six calves for the occasion, and rebel commanders gave brief speeches, expressing their desire for peace.

Langlois, who recorded the events with a small video camera, said in a brief speech from the stage that he lamented “we are at a point at which this conflict has become invisible.”

It is a war in which there are “neither good nor bad,” and in which “the poor are killing the poor,” he said.

Before the handover, a public address system played FARC revolutionary songs as farmers converged on the hamlet. There is a region of deep jungles, fast-moving rivers and villages that appear on no maps.

Communal leaders complained of the state’s absence: the lack of health care and poor roads that prevent them from getting their crops to market.

Langlois won applause when he said he understood why locals “cultivate their little bit of coca so they can buy bread and notebooks for their children.” Political analyst Alejandro Vargas called Wednesday’s event remarkable because Colombians see the FARC so rarely these days, the U.S.-backed military having increasingly driven the rebels into the country’s backwaters and across the border into Venezuela and Ecuador.

“I would think that for the average citizen it doesn’t have much relevance,” he said. “In an armed conflict both parties take whatever opportunity they can to make propaganda and demean the other.”

The government of President Juan Manuel Santos, who had from the start demanded Langlois’ release, did not immediately comment.

But Santos’ predecessor, Alvaro Uribe, was among Colombians displeased by the rebel spectacle and suggested Langlois is a guerrilla sympathizer.

“Langlois: journalistic curiosity is one thing, identification with terrorism another,” he said via Twitter. “What relation do you have with the FARC?”

Colombia’s government suspended military operations in the handover zone for a 48-hour period that ends at 6 p.m. Thursday. The government says the FARC funds itself largely through the cocaine trade. It has an estimated 9,000 fighters, and recently stepped up hit-and-run attacks on soldiers and police after suffering years of setbacks. Langlois’ capture followed the rebels’ February announcement that they were ending ransom kidnapping as a good-faith gesture in hopes of launching peace talks.

Last month, they released what they called their last “political prisoners,” 10 soldiers and police officers held for as long as 14 years.

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