

Rebel: U.S., Colombia Forces Arrested Him

By The Associated Press

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BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) -- American agents and Colombian soldiers worked together to capture a senior Colombian rebel leader, the prisoner said in comments published Wednesday, contradicting claims by Ecuador that its police arrested him.

In his first public comments since being captured in January, Ricardo Palmera of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, said Ecuadorean police discovered him in their capital, Quito, but then informed American and Colombian officials, who directed the operation leading to his capture.

Palmera's comments, published Wednesday in the weekly communist newspaper Voz, coincide with a visit to Colombia by Ecuador President Lucio Gutierrez to discuss cracking down on the movement of rebels, drugs and weapons across the countries' 400-mile border.

Gutierrez's government has insisted that Ecuador police captured Palmera, alias Simon Trinidad. Mention of U.S. help in the capture was made in the first days after Palmera's arrest but more details were never provided.

Palmera has pleaded guilty to rebellion but denied charges of murder and kidnapping. He is being tried from his jail cell via video hookup because authorities say it is too risky to transport him to court.

Palmera served as the FARC's top negotiator in peace talks with the government that collapsed in February 2002. While in Ecuador, he was working on a peace project, he said, refusing to elaborate.

After his capture, the FARC's ruling secretariat said it sent Palmera to Ecuador to organize a meeting with U.N. officials exploring an exchange of jailed rebels for hostages. The United Nations, however, said it had no such contact with Palmera.

Authorities say Palmera, 53, sat on the FARC's general staff and oversaw the group's financing. He denies that, saying he "was just one of thousands of guerrillas."

The FARC and a smaller leftist rebel group have been battling for four decades to topple Colombia's government and establish a Marxist state. An estimated 3,500 people are killed every year.