

Bone fragments not those of missing NTM missionaries in Colombia

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Colombia's attorney general says that bone fragments thought to have been those of three missing U.S. missionaries are not human remains.

The remains were exhumed last weekend outside the northwestern Colombian jungle town of Acandi near the border with Panama. The missionaries, who were working with Kuna Indians in the region, were kidnapped in January 1993.

The official said that three bags of bone fragments recovered from near where the missionaries disappeared were taken to a medical institute in Medellin for examination.

Preliminary reports affirmed that the remains "in bags 1, 2 and 3 are not human," he said. "The small fragments required a histological exam to decide what species they belonged to."

The report was given after Colombian television, citing anonymous military sources, indicated that the remains found last weekend by the army were those of the missionaries.

The missionaries, Richard Tenneoff, David Mankins and Mark Rich of the Sanford Florida-based New Tribes Mission, were kidnapped in 1993 from their mission station in Panama and were held in the Colombian jungles before they were reported killed.

Last October the FBI joined local military groups and government officials in a massive search of a river bank in the jungles of Colombia's Choco province to search for the bodies of the three. A guerrilla defector had told authorities that the missionaries were killed and buried along the river. Over 600 holes were dug, but no remains were located. The town of Ancandi where the three bodies were found last weekend is also in Choco province.

Mission officials have reported no verified contact with the missionary's captors since a year after their disappearance. However, unconfirmed reports of sightings of the men kept hopes alive. "We have two existing leads right now saying that our men are in fact alive," Ross reported. "There always seem to be two or three leads."

"Last November or December, we finally got enough pressure to get the Colombian government to mount an operation," said Scott Ross, a spokesman for NTM. Ross said that the mission has had dozens of leads since the men were captured. "We might get a lead that they're going to be released, so we wait on a jungle trail and they don't show up. You follow-up on these different things."

Ross says that the mission will continue to work on the case until it is resolved. "We have to continue to work with the idea that they have survived until we have some kind of credible evidence that they haven't. Our prayer would be that we would like to see them released if they're alive, but we would very much like to see this situation resolved if

they're not so the families, so the wives can go on with their lives." The spokesman said that they need to have good evidence that they have not survived, or see them released. He said that NTM would never write off the search because of costs or length of time.

The recent discovery of remains looked like it might be a resolution to the seven-year old disappearance, Ross said. "But, what's promising to us is that the military is willing to make some moves," he said. "And, the peace negotiations have started again which gives us one more avenue to be directly linked to the guerrillas in some form of dialog."

Nearly two years ago the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) reported that they had no information about the men and believed that they had been captured by a renegade band of former FARC guerrillas and had been executed.

Deann Alford contributed to this story.

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