

Diplomacy in action

Canadian diplomats on the

front line

to a secret location in Quito and, a few days later, saw them off to Edmonton in a United Pipeline aircraft. They arrived home just in time for Christmas.

According to unconfirmed media reports, United paid a US\$3.5 million ransom for the workers' release. John Kneale has no comment but he stresses that the Embassy had no part in negotiations if any indeed took place. "Canada does not negotiate with kidnappers," he says. "All we wanted was to ensure the safety of the hostages." Mission accomplished!

"Accompaniment" in Colombia

Outside the larger cities, Colombia is the scene of a continuing, bloody three-way conflict involving the government, Marxist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups. It is all too easy to become caught in the middle, and death may be the punishment for any community, group or individual that guerrillas or paras decide is sympathetic to another side.

There is virtually no way to prevent every killing. Still, diplomats in the embassies of Bogotá know they have a degree of leverage. The guerrillas and the paramilitaries prefer not to complicate things for themselves by attacking foreign

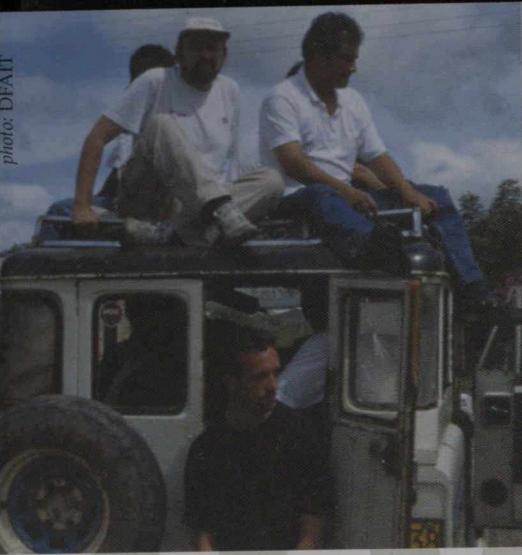
diplomats and UN representatives, or individuals and groups that enjoy the overt support of the international community.

This is why Nicholas Coghlan, First Secretary at the Canadian Embassy, spends a week or two each month journeying outside Bogotá to villages in the combat zones. There he meets as visibly as possible with mayors, community leaders, police, and foreign and local NGOs. The strategy is so common in Colombia that it even has a name: *acompañamiento*, meaning accompaniment.

"Accompaniment simply reminds the bad guys that the outside world is watching," says Coghlan. "Sometimes that's enough."

Sometimes it isn't. A week after Coghlan and a UN representative visited a village on the Atrato River in remote jungle country, 500 guerrillas stormed in and slaughtered 30 people, including women and children, the police chief and his entire force of 21. "Sadly, our visit didn't stop the massacre," says Coghlan. "It may have postponed it. It may have given some people time to leave. We don't know. We simply do what we can do and we will continue doing it. Hopefully, one day this carnage will stop and people will not fear for their lives any more." ●—

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Nick Coghlan (left, on top of jeep) accompanies a threatened union leader (to his right). Seated below is Canadian Peace Brigades International volunteer Luis van Isschott.

To most of us, the work of diplomats is safe and predictable: attending meetings and conferences, or going to receptions. But no one could predict the dangerous circumstances our diplomats sometimes encounter abroad. Here are two examples, both from Latin America.

Ninety-nine days to Christmas

In September 1999, kidnappers snatched seven Albertans and one American working for United Pipeline Systems of Edmonton in the Ecuadorean Amazon jungle. The captors demanded a US\$20 million ransom for the release of their prisoners. From then until close to Christmas, the seven-person Canadian Embassy team in Quito concentrated almost exclusively on the crisis.

Ambassador John Kneale worked tirelessly throughout the ordeal. He passed news to United, kept in touch with Foreign Affairs headquarters in Ottawa and held countless meetings with Ecuadorean ministers and senior officials, right up to the President, Jamil Mahuad. The Ambassador repeatedly emphasized one crucial point: Canada wanted the army and police to make the safety of the hostages their top priority.

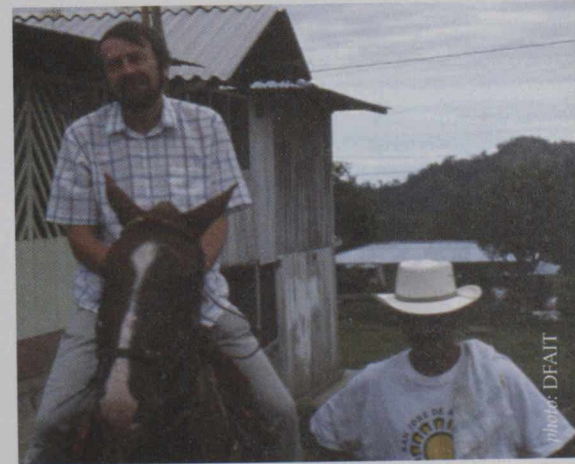
After 99 days, the kidnappers released their prisoners. The Embassy flew them



Released hostages at a press conference in Edmonton, December 22, 1999



Ambassador John Kneale



Nick Coghlan (on horseback) rides to the Community of Peace in La Unión, Uraba province.