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IRA's 'Colombia Three' escape after being sentenced to long jail terms



**The three fugitives
James Monaghan,
Niall Connolly and
Michael McCauley —
on the run**

Niall Connolly, 38, James Monaghan, 58, and Michael McCauley, 41, who were sentenced by the appeal court to 17 years in jail for training Marxist rebels in Colombia, have fled the country.

McCauley, 41, is from Lurgan in County Armagh, Monaghan, 58, is from County Donegal and Connolly, 38, is from Dublin. The three had first been detained at Bogota's El Dorado airport in August 2001 as they were about to board a flight out of the country. Their arrest led to speculation that Irish republicans had formed links with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc). The main charge against them was that they had been teaching the rebels urban terrorism techniques.

Officials in Bogota said Luis Camilio Osorio, the attorney general, asked for international cooperation to help find them. Interpol has joined in the hunt. The men went into hiding last June after being released from prison where they were serving sentences for travelling on false documents. But they were ordered to stay in the country until the outcome of a prosecution appeal against their acquittal on the more serious charge of training Farc rebels. The appeal court overturned the not guilty verdicts and imposed the long jail terms.

Sinn Fein members started for Colombia after the sentencing of the three IRA fugitives. Caitriona Ruane, a Sinn Fein Northern Ireland assembly member who has campaigned for the men's release, flew to Colombia along with Gerry Kelly and other Sinn Fein colleagues to talk to their lawyers and officials, as defence lawyers considered making an extraordinary appeal to the supreme court.

She dismissed claims that the men had fled Colombia but refused to be drawn on their whereabouts. Ruane saw the men shortly after they were whisked out of Bogota's La Modelo prison to go into hiding claiming their lives were in danger from right-wing death squads. Pedro Mahecha, Monaghan's defence attorney, disputed the idea that they had left the country. However, he declined to say whether he or lawyers for the other two were in contact with the men.

Political commentators have observed that the Colombia Three, wherever they are, must be feeling lonely. It would appear that apart from their families and a team of dedicated supporters, few in Irish political circles would relish their arrival on Irish soil in the coming weeks or months. With speculation as to their whereabouts continuing unabated, focus has turned to the possibility that the men may have escaped Colombia and be planning a trip home. Various reports in recent days have placed the men in locations such as Venezuela and Cuba. The prospect that they may step off a plane at Dublin airport has, however, seemingly rattled Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. He has conceded that his government would have to examine any possible extradition requests raised by the Colombian authorities in such an event. At present, Ireland does not have an extradition treaty in place with Colombia. Ahern has had to tread carefully over the matter. Coming amid the collapse of the



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most recent talks initiative in Northern Ireland, the timing of the decision to convict Jim Monaghan, Martin McAuley and Niall Connolly could not have been more sensitive.

Whatever concerns some may have about the judicial process in Columbia, the Irish deputy prime minister, Mary Harney, said she had “no reason” to believe that a miscarriage of justice had taken place. She called on the three men to turn themselves in to the Colombian authorities and appeal the conviction. She also said that the Irish attorney general should be called upon to deal with the men if they arrive in Ireland.

Unionists have warned the Irish government that its credibility would be put seriously to the test if the three men return. The DUP’s Ian Paisley Jr. welcomed the convictions as ‘an early Christmas present’ for the people of the North. He said they proved that the psychology of Sinn Fein remained one of ‘warfare.’

Sinn Fein is also unlikely to relish their return, given the current circumstances. It had been widely expected that the original ruling, which cleared the three of charges of training FARC guerillas, would be upheld and the men would be home before Christmas. Attention has been turned from the impasse in the North and instead now points toward Sinn Fein’s credentials in the Republic. A return home by the men would bring Sinn Fein front and centre. Unionists and the Southern parties would demand that the party support calls for the men to return to Colombia, turn themselves in and rely on the appeals process. In the event that this happens, it would be unlikely that the Irish government would call for repatriation to an Irish prison. Fine Gael has already staked out its position on this matter. Party sources say that the men could not feature in any future political negotiations and Fine Gael would reject any moves to treat them under the Good Friday agreement’s prisoner release scheme.

Just what impact this type of political pressure would have on the republican rank and file is unclear.

The deadlock between Sinn Fein and the DUP, meanwhile, has now disappeared from the front pages. Bertie Ahern said at the weekend that he did not see any prospect of agreement over IRA arms in the near future.

Senior DUP negotiator Jeffrey Donaldson fuelled the speculation when he reportedly said that his party would demand a longer “cooling off” period between IRA disarmament and power sharing if the IRA decommissioned without photographs. He refused to rule out the possibility of a deal being struck between Sinn Fein and the DUP in light of such an event. If such a decision was taken by the DUP it would be flying in the face of the providential exposure of the unchanged and unchangeable lawless disposition of Sinn Fein. Such a decision would be intolerable to all unionists.