

'Historical loss': Alleged gang leader evades US justice with deportation to El Salvador



CNN —

As part of the deportation flights of alleged terrorists at the center of a [legal and political storm](#), the US quietly dropped charges against a key alleged MS-13 leader and returned him to the pro-Trump leader of El Salvador.

César Humberto López-Larios, an alleged top leader of the MS-13 gang who US investigators believe has information that could implicate top Salvadoran government officials in possibly corrupt deals with the violent gang, was deported on one of the [controversial flights](#), according to current and former US officials and court documents.

It's a deal that would benefit [President Nayib Bukele](#), the brash Salvadoran leader who has become a star among pro-Trump US conservatives.

"He's a friend of mine," President Donald Trump said of Bukele in the Oval Office on Friday.

The deportations are part of a plan by the Trump administration to pay El Salvador to imprison immigrants accused of crimes and expelled from the US. MS-13 deportations, particularly of leaders, who are a priority for Salvadoran officials, and Trump officials agreed, according to a US official.

But bringing MS-13 leaders to face charges in the US has been a top priority for the Justice Department, and the transfer is a major loss of potential intelligence for investigators who helped track down López-Larios for his arrest in Mexico last year, current and former officials say.

"It's a historical loss," says a former federal agent who spent years working on MS-13 and other gang cases. "He was a potential high-level source. And he doesn't get to face US justice."

López-Larios was arrested last year and charged by federal prosecutors in Brooklyn with directing the transnational gang's activities in the US, El Salvador, Mexico, and other countries.

He was flown a week ago Saturday to Central America as part of a broader deal under which El Salvador accepted 238 alleged members of the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua held by the US, along with 22 other MS-13 members, according to court documents and US officials briefed on the matter.

In the US, the flights have become the subject of an [intense legal and political fight](#) over whether the Trump administration violated an order from a federal judge who had ordered deportations under the Alien Enemies Act halted even as planes carrying deportees were en route to Central America. The White House and allies have accused US District [Judge James Boasberg](#) of intruding on Trump's executive powers and aiding terrorists.

In San Salvador, Bukele, whose crackdown on gang violence has buoyed his popularity, is touting the intelligence value of López-Larios, one of the so-called Twelve Apostles of the Devil, the gang's top leadership group.

US prosecutors allege that top gang leaders negotiated deals with the Bukele government to reduce the number of public murders, thereby creating the impression of lower murder rates, in exchange for facilitating the gang's operations, according to a [2022 indictment filed in Brooklyn federal court](#).

López-Larios's attorney, the Salvadoran Justice and Foreign Relations ministries, and the president's office didn't respond to requests for comment.

López-Larios was a key capture of Task Force Vulcan, formed in the first Trump term and continued by the Biden administration, which has been elevated under Attorney General Pam Bondi to operate from her office and given broader authority.

Given his leadership seniority, sources believe López-Larios could provide a window into not only the gang's operations in Mexico and the US, but deals made with government officials that have helped gang members avoid US prosecution.

On GPS: Trump vs the courts

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López-Larios was [awaiting trial](#) in Brooklyn on charges including material support to terrorists and narco-terrorism conspiracy when US Attorney John Durham asked a judge this month to dismiss the charges, citing "sensitive and important foreign policy considerations." Durham, in a [letter to the judge overseeing the case](#), said the US was allowing El Salvador to first pursue prosecution against López-Larios. (The judge dismissed the case without prejudice.)

The Brooklyn US Attorney's office declined to comment.

The former agent who worked on MS-13 investigations says Bukele and Salvadoran officials have resisted extraditing gang members to the US and investigators believe that at least part of the reason Salvadoran officials wanted López-Larios and other MS-13 members back was to ensure they

didn't cooperate with US investigations.

"It's to make sure we won't get the evidence from someone who can corroborate that he has been cooperating with a terrorist organization," the former agent said.

MS-13 links from Long Island to El Salvador

In court documents, prosecutors describe the sophisticated leadership structure that allowed the Twelve Apostles of the Devil members, including López-Larios, to oversee a vast territory stretching from Long Island, New York, to southern California to Central America. Leaders greenlit murders, directed drug trafficking and weapons smuggling networks, prosecutors say.

And they entered into deals with successive Salvadoran governments, extracting better treatment for gang members in prison in exchange for reducing public violence to aid election campaigns, according to the [2020 federal indictment of top MS-13 leaders](#) including López-Larios filed in Brooklyn.

This includes the government of Bukele, which has formed close ties with conservative figures, including [private military contractor Erik Prince](#) and Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Bukele, who became president in 2019 and won reelection last year, celebrated this weekend's gang deportees' arrival at the country's notorious prison called [CECOT](#). He posted a social media video set to dramatic music showing handcuffed prisoners, including López-Larios, being roughly marched from aircraft to buses and then to the prison facility.

Trump said he didn't sign controversial proclamation. The Federal Register shows one with his signature

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In one such deal negotiated between top MS-13 leaders and Bukele government officials, gang leaders “negotiated with high-level government officials for financial benefits, control of territory, less restrictive prison conditions” to enable MS-13 leaders to keep controlling gang operations, according to a separate 2022 Brooklyn indictment of MS-13 leaders. Gang leaders also “demanded that the government of El Salvador refuse to extradite MS-13 leaders,” to the US for prosecution, the indictment says.

“In exchange, MS-13 leaders agreed to reduce the number of public murders in El Salvador, which politically benefitted the government of El Salvador, by creating the perception that the government was reducing the murder rate. When in fact, MS-13 leaders continued to authorize murders where the victims’ bodies were buried or otherwise hidden,” the 2022 indictment says. Gang leaders also agreed to use their influence to direct gang members and their families to support Nuevas Ideas, Bukele’s political party in legislative elections, the indictment says.

After elections in 2021, Bukele’s party won a legislative supermajority and promptly ousted the country’s attorney general, who had endorsed extraditions of MS-13 gang leaders to the US, and members of the Salvadoran Supreme Court, according to the 2022 indictment of MS-13 gang leaders filed in Brooklyn federal court.

In 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department issued sanctions against two Bukele government officials who the U.S. alleged were involved in negotiating deals that included financial incentives for MS-13 and another group known as the 18th Street Gang in exchange for reduced violence. “In addition to Salvadoran government financial allocations in 2020, the gangs also received privileges for gang leadership incarcerated in Salvadoran prisons,

such as the provision of mobile phones and prostitutes," the Treasury Department said at the time.

Bukele didn't mention López-Larios by name but said in a social media post that one of the deportees was "a member of the criminal organization's highest structure." He added that "this will help us finalize intelligence gathering and go after the last remnants of MS-13."

Saturday night flights

Three government planes carried deportees on March 15, two carrying alleged Tren the Aragua gang members whose deportation was authorized by Trump's invocation of a 1798 law mostly used in wartime called the Alien Enemies Act.

The two planes carrying the Tren de Aragua gang members were already in the air and, according to Justice Department court filings, in international airspace when US District Judge James Boasberg issued to halt the deportations. As a result, government lawyers say, Boasberg's order that the planes turn around and return to the US didn't apply.

Justice Department lawyers have cited national security reasons for refusing to disclose more about the third flight that carried the MS-13 members. They also say the plane carrying the MS-13 members was carrying deportees under a separate authority not covered by Boasberg's order to ground the planes.

Bukele, for his part, appeared to relish his role in the controversy over the Trump administration's defiance of Boasberg's order.

He reposted on social media a newspaper headline on the judge's order with a laughing emoji and a comment: "Oopsie... Too late."

