

VENEZUELA

As the U.S. tracks suspected Venezuelan gang members, a look at a group that's helping

By Antonio Maria Delgado

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A wanted poster for Hector Guerrero Flores, aka "Niño Guerrero," identified by Venezuelan authorities as the leader of Tren de Aragua.



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A small team of Venezuelans and former U.S. officials with deep connections to police and intelligence in the South American country has been providing

information to the Trump administration about the number and identities of members of Tren de Aragua and other Venezuelan gangs headed to or already in the United States.

The group, which has been meeting with high-ranking members of the administration, made a presentation to President Donald Trump's team before he was inaugurated on Jan. 20, detailing links between the feared Tren de Aragua gang and the Nicolás Maduro regime, and provided official documents obtained from Venezuelan police agencies identifying 1,800 gang members believed to have been sent into the United States, three sources with knowledge of the situation told the Miami Herald.

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Among those sent to the United States were 300 gang members who had received paramilitary training in Venezuela, said Gary Berntsen, a decorated former CIA station chief who headed the agency's unit searching for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan.

"The Venezuelan regime has assumed operational control of these guys [Tren de Aragua] and has trained 300 of them; they have given them paramilitary training, training them to fire weapons, on how to conduct sabotage, how to use crypto," Berntsen, one of the team members, said. "They have given them all like a four- to six-week course. They put these 300 guys through that course and that they were deploying them into the United States to 20 locations, to 20 separate states".

Another team member, who requested anonymity to protect the identities of the team's sources in Venezuela, said the group has had access to records from the police agencies of the South American country and that these were provided to the Trump administration, and that they have led to the identification and arrests of at least 800

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Venezuelans who are believed to be either full-fledged members of Tren de Aragua or members of smaller affiliated gangs.

Logistics and money

The team of investigators, which for years have been exposing the threat to the U.S. posed by the Maduro regime, has in the past helped federal investigators in the U.S. target top members of the Caracas government accused by the U.S. justice system of running the Soles drug cartel and of high level corruption through different administrations.

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The administration has also obtained data from law enforcement agencies from Latin American nations where Tren de Aragua members set up criminal operations before attempting to extend their reach into the United States. The gang's presence has been blamed for a spike of violent crimes in those countries.

In the presentation to the Trump administration, the group claimed that Venezuelan intelligence services had provided logistics and money to hundreds of members of Tren de Aragua to enter the U.S.

The Tren de Aragua members were deliberately sent into the largest American cities to create problems for U.S. law enforcement agencies, the source told the Herald. But they "are not just criminals sent to cause havoc. They are soldiers sent in an asymmetric warfare operation against the United States," the source speaking under condition of anonymity said.

Tren de Aragua members were also tasked with setting up drug distribution networks in major U.S. cities to fill the void created by the crackdown on the Mara Salvatrucha gang, also known as MS-13, which was severely weakened by the arrest of its leadership in El Salvador in 2022.

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The Salvadoran gang had served as an important U.S. outlet for the drugs provided by Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, which according to U.S. law enforcement investigations is one of the top partners of the Venezuelan cartel allegedly headed by Maduro and his number two in the regime, Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello.

The group of unofficial Venezuelan investigators was able to have access to high-level Trump officials because they have for years assisted the U.S. justice system in some of the biggest cases about the involvement of Venezuelan regime officials in corruption and drug-trafficking operations. Those investigations have been going on for more than a decade and the information gathered by the team has at times been provided by Venezuelan military and police officials willing to covertly assist U.S. law enforcement agencies.

Last year, the U.S. government increased the rewards for the capture of Maduro and Cabello to \$25 million each, the highest such rewards and the same amount offered at some point for top Sinaloa Cartel boss Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman and for Osama Bin Laden.

'Oversized combat brigade'

One of the documents the group has provided to the administration, which the Miami Herald was able to obtain, contained the names of 1,281 Venezuelan alleged gang members, sometimes accompanied by photos and the criminal charges they had faced in the South American country. According to the group, some of the gang members were part of an estimated 20,000 inmates who have been released from Venezuelan prisons during Maduro's tenure and who were told that they had to leave the country if they wanted to remain free.

Information gathered by the team from sources inside the regime points to a plan that would place 5,000 gang members inside the United States, Berntsen said.

Run by the 300 gang members-turned-operatives, he said the people pose a dangerous threat to U.S. national security. “This is the equivalent of an oversized combat brigade dispersed through 20 different locations, but with thousands of people that would be able to communicate, move drugs, and do whatever they needed, and be able on hand to put pressure on the U.S. with violence in cities, and build out a massive criminal infrastructure in America,” he said.

Berntsen said the team became aware of the situation while conducting an investigation on a separate case. One of their sources told them of Maduro’s plans and they started gathering information and meeting with officials at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

At the time, however, the Biden administration was determined was negotiating with the Maduro regime and the team’s warnings appeared to have gone unheeded, he said. Although frustrated, the team felt it was important to continue moving forward with the case, he added.

“These are bad people. But we’re not going to just f---ing watch them take over our country. No, we’re not going to let them do that. I draw the line here,” Berntsen said.

The Tren de Aragua gang, formed in the past decade in the notorious Tocorón prison in Venezuela's Aragua state, has spread throughout the countries that border Venezuela and developed a reputation for being ruthless and fearless.

According to the presentation the group made to the administration, members of the gang in essence act as an armed branch and hit-man squad for the Soles drug cartel, which U.S. prosecutors have said is headed by Maduro himself and other high-ranking Venezuelan government officials.

An organizational chart developed by the group for U.S. officials shows that Tren de Aragua leader Hector Guerrero Flores, aka "Niño Guerrero", and his lieutenants, Yohan José Romero, aka "Johan Petrica", and Giovanny San Vicente, aka "Giovanny," report to cartel leaders, handling a number of illicit business including illegal mining and drug-trafficking operations.

In addition to the information provided by the team, the Trump administration has been receiving data provided by the police organizations from Peru, Chile, Costa Rica and Colombia, countries that had a large number of Tren de Aragua members, the source said.

State of emergency in Peru

The gang's presence has been blamed for a surge in violence in these countries. On Monday, the Peruvian government declared Lima in a state of emergency, following the killing of a popular singer who was being extorted by criminals.

Peru's Minister of Foreign Trade and Tourism, Úrsula León, told the Spanish news service EFE on Thursday that the state of emergency had been necessary in light of the surge in violence primarily caused by Venezuelan criminals.

"There has been a high level of immigration of citizens from various countries, mainly in recent years from Venezuela due to the crisis that country has been experiencing. Of these, as I pointed out, many Venezuelan citizens who came to Peru have contributed greatly and continue to contribute, and are excellent, excellent people," the minister said. However, he added, "a group arrived, and they have continued to arrive, people who did not respect rights; people who came with criminal records or people who entered the country illegally. And these generate this chaos."

Although Tren de Aragua members originally moved to countries near Venezuela, they were later encouraged by their controllers in the Venezuelan government to head to the United States, the source in the group told the Herald.

"It became a sort of fun adventure for them," the source said. Unlike other Venezuelan migrants who have had to brave crossing the Darien Gap, the treacherous, predator-filled jungle on the border of Colombia and Panama, "these guys didn't cross the jungle on foot," the source said.

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Often times they were transported by boat by the arrangements made by members of Maduro's intelligence services from Colombia to Nicaragua and from Nicaragua to Mexico, where they were handed over to smugglers known as coyotes belonging to the Sinaloa Cartel to make their way to the U.S.

The source said that the information provided to the Trump administration, along with the information shared by police agencies from other Latin American countries, has been used to search for the alleged gang members from the time Trump took office.

According to the source, the mugshots provided have proven to be particularly helpful for U.S. law enforcement agencies because some of the suspected gang members who entered illegally into the country have used fake names and forged Colombian documents.

The presentation made to administration officials about the dangers posed by the Venezuelan criminals may have inspired the proclamation issued by Trump last weekend to announce the U.S. would find and deport members of Tren de Aragua. Trump accused Maduro of "perpetrating an invasion of, and a predatory incursion into, the United States, which poses a substantial danger" to the country.

Tren de Aragua “operates in conjunction with Cartel de los Soles, the Nicolas Maduro regime-sponsored, narco-terrorism enterprise based in Venezuela, and commits brutal crimes, including murders, kidnappings, extortions, and human, drug, and weapons trafficking,” Trump said as he invoked wartime powers created in the 1798 Alien Enemy Act to assume the authority to expedite the mass deportation of Venezuelans in the U.S. suspected of being gang members.

The proclamation, added to Trump’s previous decision to suspend Temporary Protected Status for close to 348,000 Venezuelans and the decision to send 238 deported Venezuelans over the weekend to a maximum-security prison in El Salvador, has garnered the administration harsh criticism from Venezuelan community leaders and human-right activists, who accuse the president of using the presence of the gang members as an excuse to get rid of Venezuelan migrants.

The sources who have provided the administration with information about Tren de Aragua gang members were not able to confirm if all 238 Venezuelans sent to El Salvador were in fact criminals, but said that a significant number of them are.

“Most of those that were sent to El Salvador had criminal records, not necessarily from crimes committed in the United States but from the others countries from which they came,” the source said. “Among these was a group of gang members that had killed a lot of people in Peru before they were sent into the United States.”

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The Tren de Aragua gang operates as a loosely organized criminal syndicate, serving as an umbrella organization for smaller gangs specialized in all types of crimes, from kidnapping, extortion and drug-trafficking to prostitution, robbery and murders for hire.

Tons of cocaine

The team of investigators advising the Trump administration said that the formal members of the gang serve as organizational leaders of different cells that have

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recruited other Venezuelans in the U.S. cities they were sent to, but not all members of the new cells are necessarily considered to be official gang members.

This follows the organizational structure the gang implemented inside the Venezuelan prisons, where they recruited new members from the general population in order to have the numbers to rule the other inmates.

Another of the main themes of the presentation made for U.S. officials is that Tren de Aragua is directly controlled by the top leadership of the Soles cartel, which U.S. officials believe exports between 250 and 350 tons of cocaine per year, mainly to Europe and the United States.

The U.S. Justice Department has outstanding drug-trafficking indictments against Maduro and Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, who are accused with heading the Soles cartel. But the sources said other key figures in the Caracas regime actually control the gang, including Prisons Minister Iris Varela; Tachira state Gov. Fredy Bernal, and Jorge Rodríguez, president of the regime's National Assembly.

Another key figure in the gang's development is former Vice President Tarek El Aissami, who was a key member of the regime and the Soles cartel before he fell from grace and was jailed in Venezuela, according to the presentation prepared for Trump officials.

In his proclamation last week, Trump highlighted the alleged link between the Tren de Aragua gang, which he referred to as TdA, and the Maduro regime.

"TdA has engaged in and continues to engage in mass illegal migration to the United States to further its objectives of harming United States citizens, undermining public safety, and supporting the Maduro regime's goal of destabilizing democratic nations in the Americas, including the United States," Trump said.

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“TdA is closely aligned with, and indeed has infiltrated, the Maduro regime, including its military and law enforcement apparatus.”

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I guess because Trump regarding TdA was right all along.
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