

US-Venezuelan forces carry out extrajudicial killing of alleged cartel leader as they bomb informal miners

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Late Friday night, President Donald Trump announced on social media that US Southern Command had carried out a “lethal kinetic strike” killing Héctor Guerrero Flores—known as “Niño Guerrero” or “El Innombrable”—the alleged leader of the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua.

The extrajudicial execution was carried out “at my direction,” Trump posted, attaching a 10-second video of a structure being struck from the air. The operation, he said, had been coordinated with Venezuelan leaders.

In December, Guerrero had been indicted by a federal grand jury in New York on charges of ordering, directing, and facilitating acts of terrorism and violence in the United States. He was never arrested, never charged in a Venezuelan court, and never tried.

The operation had in fact been underway for days before Trump’s announcement. On Tuesday, Venezuelan military helicopters were already conducting attacks over the gold-mining territory of Bolívar state, controlled by Tren de Aragua.

Residents filmed aircraft overflying the area, firing bursts of gunfire or dropping troops. Hundreds of men—informal miners—were seen fleeing from the open-pit mines allegedly controlled by criminal organizations.

“Bombs and gunfire could be heard in the jungle,” a neighbor of Las Claritas told Reuters. “There are mines in those areas. This is bad; you can’t go out.”

Human rights organization Provea issued a warning: “The Venezuelan Army is deploying a massive operation in Las Cristinas and at Km 88 in Bolívar state. We warn of the risk of extrajudicial executions and arbitrary detentions against the civilian population in the area.”

The men who fled through that jungle mud were not cartel commanders. They were informal miners—workers, however entangled the criminal structures may be in informal mining across Venezuela’s Orinoco Mining Arc, a vast territory near the borders with Guyana and Brazil.

Tren de Aragua, it should be noted, has no large-scale

involvement in trafficking cocaine to the United States, according to InSight Crime. Instead, informal gold mining and local drug trafficking, and the violence from the conflict between criminal organizations and the state, have been fueled by the economic desperation that decades of US sanctions deliberately produced.

The killing of Guerrero is a dramatic escalation inland of the extrajudicial campaign the Trump administration has been waging since September in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific. At least 210 fishermen have now been killed in US military strikes on small boats, accused of drug smuggling without evidence, identification, formal charges, or trial.

The same pattern has been applied to alleged cartel leaders in Mexico, reportedly with CIA participation according to CNN.

Six months after US special forces abducted sitting Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, bringing them to the US to face a rigged trial in New York, the Chavista government led by Maduro’s former Vice President Delcy Rodríguez is jointly operating with the US military to execute Venezuelans under indictment in US courts.

Now, into the territory the militaries are attempting to clear, a different criminal cartel will move: US and Canadian mining corporations with long histories of corruption, environmental destruction and violent repression.

Rodríguez and the Chavista-controlled legislature passed a new mining law in April designed to attract foreign investment, and US Interior Secretary Doug Burgum confirmed in Caracas that the Venezuelan government had pledged security guarantees for incoming companies. Canadian miner Crystallex had already sought to develop the Las Cristinas gold project until Hugo Chávez nationalized it in 2008.

The cartels hiding in the jungle are being replaced by gangsters in Wall Street boardrooms who will manage concessions, extract the gold and remit the profits abroad

while informal miners are pushed off the deposits they have worked for years.

This is the broader logic of what has unfolded since January 3, when US forces abducted Maduro. The Trump administration has seized effective control of Venezuela's oil exports. Nearly 100 million barrels of oil, worth an estimated \$8 billion, have moved through a system Washington controls with no public accounting for sales, revenues or expenditures.

The same opaque mechanism has been extended to gold and other mineral exports. Acting President Rodríguez's government submits monthly budget requests for US approval while Washington and private traders manage the sales, audits, and disbursements. Rodríguez has also renewed ties with the IMF, hoping for access to billions in credits.

Trump's main objective was explicit: to drive out Chinese and Russian economic and political influence and gain unfettered control over the world's largest proven oil reserves—a prize US and British imperialism have coveted since Standard Oil and Shell divided Venezuela between them in the 1920s.

Almost overnight, the country's political status has been set back decades. Writer Eduardo Galeano cited a US businessman in Caracas under the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in the 1950s: "Here you have the freedom to do with your money whatever you please; for me, that freedom is worth more than all political and civil liberties combined."

Galeano added: "Venezuela was a vast oil well surrounded by prisons and torture chambers, importing everything from the United States: automobiles and refrigerators, condensed milk, eggs, lettuce, laws and decrees."

This week, a Venezuelan from the working-class district of Petare, described to *El País*: "The *gringos* do whatever they want and nobody here says anything. They said things were going to get better, but the dollar is worse than ever. I think those guys just want to take the oil."

Roberto Tovar, a plumber from Chapellín, was equally blunt: "The *gringos* arrived and began making promises that things would improve. This isn't getting better: it gets worse every day. I've even thought about emigrating again."

Venezuelan economist Ricardo Hausmann, commenting on how Washington handles the country's oil revenues, noted: "Oil production is rising, but the currency continues to depreciate every day and inflation is accelerating. Not much money is actually coming into Caracas."

It could hardly be otherwise. The attraction of capital to Venezuela—whether from Wall Street bond traders calculating when oil will pay their defaulted bonds, or Canadian miners eyeing Las Cristinas—rests on one

foundational condition: the maintenance of mass poverty.

Venezuela must be sold as a source of cheap labor and cheap resources. That requires keeping wages at their present level—a minimum of \$0.27 per month—suppressing any organized working-class resistance, and ensuring that the oil revenues flow to creditors rather than into wages or public services. The shooting and bombing of informal workers is not an unfortunate side effect of this arrangement. It is its precondition.

This is what Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler described in 1935, looking back on 33 years of US military service: "I spent most of my time as a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. ... Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints." Al Capone never did receive those hints—but Trump, through his Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, now operates that racket on a global scale, with greater gangsterism and precision-guided munitions.

The conditions being imposed today recall precisely those that have historically produced the most explosive working-class resistance in Venezuela and across Latin America.

The austerity and privatizations of the 1980s produced the *Caracazo* of 1989—a mass workers' uprising that shook the foundations of Venezuelan bourgeois rule. The protest movements that followed were betrayed and channeled behind the election of Hugo Chávez, whose bourgeois nationalist program proved structurally incapable of breaking with imperialism and ultimately handed the country back to Wall Street.

Today's mass struggles of the working class require a new leadership that turns to the lessons drawn by the International Committee of the Fourth International—the only tendency that has consistently analyzed the betrayals of Social Democracy, Stalinism, Pabloism and bourgeois nationalism across the region, and that fights for the revolutionary unity of the working class across the Americas.



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