

CIA ran secret drone campaign against Ecuadorian fishermen—prosecutor investigating it was murdered

Andrea Lobo
17 August 2026

Drone strikes on three Ecuadorian fishing boats near the Galapagos Islands were carried out under a covert CIA program of the type authorized personally by the president and never publicly acknowledged, the *Washington Post* reported last Thursday.

That same day, in Panama, US War Secretary Pete Hegseth announced the doctrine behind it. Anyone trafficking drugs, he declared, is “a target, just like ISIS or al-Qaida.” Washington had spent 25 years refining “the kill chain on how to diagnose and target networks halfway around the world,” he added, and would now apply those skills in the hemisphere “ruthlessly.”

Two months earlier, the prosecutor whose case files included those exact three attacks was shot dead in the street. Gloria Alexandra Bravo Cedeño, 46, was killed on June 14 in central Manta by a gunman on a motorcycle as she walked to her car. Her sister Olinda was also killed trying to shield her. Not one of the international reports on the CIA revelations has mentioned her name and made the connection.

Murder Inc. extended across an entire hemisphere

Before each attack, the *Post* established from flight and ship-tracking data that a Cessna Citation Longitude airplane fitted with surveillance equipment flew from Ilopango airport, El Salvador toward the fishing boats. Radio transmissions recorded it arriving from Tennessee with a crew of six in November and taxiing to a military section of the airport.

It flew under a US registration number that appears in no FAA record—federal law exempts “aircraft of the national defense forces of the United States”—reserved by a company with no evident website, listing as its address a mailbox at a UPS store in Virginia, a detail first reported by the *New York Times* the previous day.

On January 20, the day the *Fiorella* vanished, the tower recorded the plane’s pre-dawn departure. “FENIX 701,” the pilot said in English with an American accent. It had flown

toward the *Fiorella*’s position on January 17, 18 and 20, covering 750 miles on the last flight before dropping off public tracking, and landed back at Ilopango at 9:30 a.m. The *Fiorella* transmitted its position for the last time two and a half hours later.

Ilopango is no arbitrary choice. In 1985 and 1986, the airport served as the hub through which US military and CIA officers funneled weapons and logistics to the Nicaraguan contras in their terrorist war against the Sandinista government. US imperialism has resumed operations from the same runway four decades on. Former ambassador John Feeley told the *Post* the operation appeared to be run “out of a very nontraditional command.”

Trump has signed an authorization for CIA operations against transnational criminal organizations, including through lethal force. Most recently, threatening a similar CIA action like the tracking of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro before his abduction by US Special Operations Forces in January, the White House authorized covert CIA operations against the Cuban leadership.

The survivors’ accounts make clear that the plan was a mass execution and abduction. Quadcopter drones dropped explosives onto the galley of the *Negra Francisca Duarte II*, where the gas cylinders were stored, destroying much of the vessel instantly. One crewman was thrown into a diesel tank; another lost most of the vision in one eye. The range of such drones means the operators were close by.

The men reached a blue ship they took for a rescue vessel. Armed men in brown camouflage, some with US flag patches, leveled rifles at them, then cuffed and hooded them on deck. “They took us to the bow. We heard: ‘Boom! Boom!’ I managed to lift the hood and saw them blowing up the boat,” one survivor recounted. The Americans opened beers in front of the hooded fishermen and remarked on how cold they were.

After eight days the men were handed to the Salvadoran coast guard and deported home. “Why did they hand us over to foreigners when we were near the Ecuadorian coast guard?” they asked.

An Ecuadorian patrol vessel had inspected the *Negra*

Francisca before the attack and found nothing illicit. Of the 46 crew across the three boats, Human Rights Watch found only four had any criminal record—none for trafficking or violence.

Eight men from the *Fiorella* remain missing, and the relatives demand they be returned alive. María Mero, whose husband and brother were both aboard, gave testimony to Ecuador's Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDH) three months after the boat vanished. "If some patrol has them, or they are imprisoned, let them tell us and hand them over, because they are fishermen," she said.

The CDH does not call this a shipwreck. It calls it enforced disappearance by a foreign military force.

The mother of one of the fishermen told *El País* that families had been told it was better not to search. The warning was actually a threat by the US puppet regime of President Daniel Noboa.

Before her killing, prosecutor Bravo Cedeño spoke to Human Rights Watch in early May, explaining that neither her office nor the investigative police had the authority or logistical means to investigate at sea, and that port and naval authorities never answered her requests for information.

She had warned for months that she was at risk and moved under police escort. According to Drop Site News, whose correspondent Camila Lourdes Galarza broke the photographic evidence of the *Negra Francisca* bombing in April, that escort was not present when she was killed. Galarza has also reported that under Noboa's state of emergency, US personnel and contractors operate with immunity from Ecuadorian law.

The state obstructed Bravo Cedeño's investigation into attacks carried out by a US covert program, and then she was killed.

In Washington, the response has been silence. Members of the congressional intelligence committees contacted by the *Post* declined to comment. Covert action requires a presidential finding reported to those committees: either the ranking Democrats were briefed on a program that disappeared eight fishermen and said nothing for seven months, or they were not briefed and will not say so now.

A June 11 letter from Representatives Joaquín Castro and Bill Keating demanding answers went unanswered past its July 10 deadline, and Keating's amendment to force release of unclassified footage of the three incidents was defeated on the House floor. The same party voted overwhelmingly for the \$901 billion military budget that pays for all of it.

In Ecuador, the story was buried within 48 hours. *El Universo*, *Expreso*, *Extra*, *El Diario* and others ran the same EFE wire copy, paragraph for paragraph, as did outlets across Latin America. No editorials. No summons of the foreign minister before the National Assembly. No investigative follow-up. *Televistazo* alone put the question to the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry and the US Embassy, and received no answer from any of them.

Reactions came only from the legislature, where Noboa's

own bloc urged caution while conceding that an operation of this nature, executed inside national territory, necessarily had to have been known to the government.

Meanwhile, a DEA assessment reported in July found the campaign had no discernible effect on cocaine availability, price or purity in the United States. Cocaine leaves Ecuador in containers aboard merchant ships owned by Noboa's oligarchic family installed in power with US backing, not in the small fishing vessels being blown apart at sea.

The Galapagos operation and Condor

The *Post* stresses that the CIA program is separate, institutionally and methodologically, from Operation Southern Spear. Southern Spear is overt: uniformed forces carrying out strikes announced on social media by Hegseth himself. The Galapagos operation sought to leave no fingerprint, employing an unregistered aircraft, a shell company, an unmarked ship. The survivors were seized, hooded, held at sea for eight days, and then delivered to a third country, which processed them as shipwreck victims.

That is the method of Operation Condor—the network through which the US-backed dictatorships of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil coordinated to abduct, torture and disappear opponents across each other's borders. Tens of thousands were killed. Its purpose was to decapitate left-wing forces and the workers' movement across the continent. The stage is being set for operations of precisely that character.

Trump's "Shield of the Americas," launched in March, aligns Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama behind Washington's command. The same Bukele government that opened Ilopango to the surveillance flights, and whose coast guard helped with the abduction of fishermen, opened the CECOT prison to hundreds of deportees expelled from the United States. The machinery that disappears Ecuadorian fishermen and the machinery that disappears immigrant workers from American cities are one and the same.

Hegseth was explicit about the geography. The "kill chain" he pledged to employ ruthlessly extends through the Pentagon's SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM together. NORTHCOM's area of responsibility is the continental United States, Mexico and Canada. The apparatus being built is not aimed at cartels. It is aimed at the working class throughout the Americas.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact