



**InSight
Crime**


ANALYSIS AND INVESTIGATION
OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Maduro's El Dorado: Gangs, Guerrillas and Gold in Venezuela



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1. The Governors, the Gang and the War for Bolívar's Gold

President Maduro's plan to help governors fund their states by gifting them each a gold mine soon ran into trouble. In the sprawling state of Bolívar, this led to immediate conflict. The criminal gangs that ran Venezuela's mining heartland would never surrender. One group, in particular, has led the resistance.

On November 5, 2019, **threatening pamphlets** appeared on the streets of El Callao, a mining town in Venezuela's eastern state of Bolívar. The town was already on edge. A week before, a **severed head** was found on a road in El Callao. The pamphlets contained a message from a local gang leader, Alejandro Rafael Ochoa Sequea, alias "Toto," to the municipal mayor, Alberto Hurtado.

"You handed over your land to the government," they read. "Resign, you have 48 hours to pack your bags because there is going to be more death, and if you don't go, I'm coming for your head."

That night, armed men on motorbikes raced around the streets, **firing off their weapons** and setting off a grenade.

This investigation exposes how the Maduro regime's attempts to control Venezuela's mining heartland in the state of Bolívar has led to criminal chaos, as guerrilla groups, heavily armed gangs and corrupt state elements battle over the country's gold.

Toto's message and his gang's terror campaign came shortly after President Nicolás Maduro had announced an unusual **new policy**: He would give each state governor a gold mine to help fund their administrations. There was one problem. Bolívar's gold mines were controlled by brutal criminal gangs known as sindicatos (unions). And the sindicatos such as Toto's had no intention of giving up the mines without a fight.

By pitting the governors against the gangs, the Venezuelan government fanned the flames of the war to control Bolívar's gold – a war that continues to this day. In El Callao, it is a war that has seen Toto's small gang of local thugs **hold out for more than two years** against the concentrated forces of the Venezuelan state. And this unlikely resistance has become a symbol of the Venezuelan state's inability to control one of its last economic lifelines: gold.

A Longtime Outsider

From the outset, Toto and his gang have been no strangers to conflict with the Venezuelan state. But in Bolívar, this made his gang an outlier.

At the time of his gang's formation around 2014, Bolívar was governed by a former **military comrade** of ex-Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez: General Francisco Rangel Gómez. From 2008 to 2012, Rangel presided over Chávez's attempts to centralize state control over Venezuelan gold by **expropriating** international mining operations and **requiring producers** to sell most of their gold to the Venezuelan Central Bank (Banco Central de Venezuela – BCV).

The policies devastated Venezuela's gold sector. Foreign capital soon fled, and **Minerven**, the state-owned mining company, saw its production crater as it could not access financing. Industrial mining gave way to small-scale, unregulated operations controlled and exploited by rapacious criminal gangs. But in the havoc, Rangel saw an opportunity.

*"We gave you **half a kilo** of gold for your campaign for Congress and you."*

According to **whistleblower testimonies** from two former **security force agents**, a clandestine network existed within Rangel's inner circle armed gangs and doled out criminal concessions in Bolívar's mining zones. They asked for one thing in return: gold.

"In the state of Bolívar," one of the whistleblowers asserted, "it is almost impossible to apprehend a member of an organized crime group that is not connected to [then-chief of Bolívar's state police] Julio César Fuentes Manzulli, the strong arm of Governor Rangel."

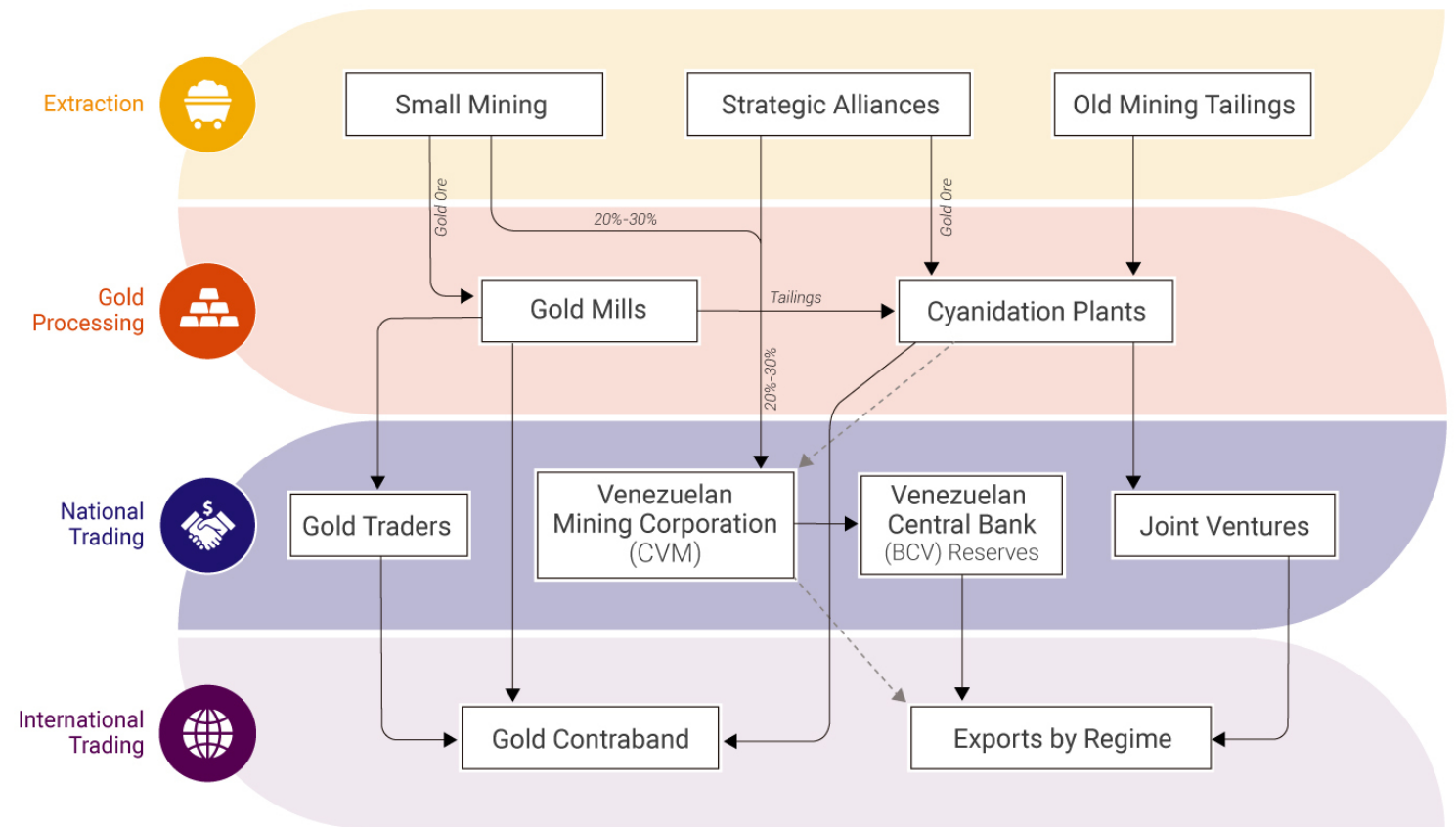
This was not entirely accurate. In El Callao, a historic mining hub, criminal groups with roots in local mining communities began to push back against Rangel's criminal fiefdom. The most powerful was Toto's, which emerged in the southern **sector of El Perú**, home to many of the mines that Minerven had now abandoned.

What Toto lacked in political support, he made up for in close community ties and brutality. His gang held out in the face of sporadic police operations. It also took advantage of the weakening of Toto’s rivals to take over their mines and even launched **violent raids** against groups backed by Rangel. By 2016, Toto had established himself as the dominant independent criminal power in El Callao.

“The only sector [the government] can’t control is El Perú,” a resident of El Callao, who did not want to be identified for security reasons, told InSight Crime in 2020. “Why? Because the whole gang are natives of El Perú. Local people protect the criminals because they saw them grow up.”

In 2017, Rangel was forced from the governor’s office. He was replaced by Justo Noguera Pietri, a figure from Venezuela’s military elite. Noguera was tasked with bringing order to the anarchic mining gangs Rangel had allowed to flourish.

The Gold Supply Chain in Venezuela



—▶ Confirmed Gold Movements
 ---▶ Probable Gold Movements

*The diagram represents the most significant actors and gold movements identified by InSight Crime in Venezuela’s gold supply chain.

insightcrime.org

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Source: InSight Crime investigations

Under Noguera, police operations gave way to full military offensives. In August 2018, Toto's territories were raided by as many as **200 military and police personnel**. The operation uncovered grizzly evidence of Toto's reign of terror, including a mass grave containing **14 human skulls**.

Toto upped the ante. Over the next year, his gang made several displays of defiance, including the **mutilation** of a young army deserter and releasing a viral video of gang members shooting high-caliber weapons in the air.

But Toto was not inflexible. He was quite willing to grease the wheels where necessary. His furious salvo against Hurtado, the mayor of El Callao, in 2019 contained a striking allegation.

“We gave you half a kilo of gold for your campaign for Congress and you won. You came back here taking 650 grams from me to be mayor and you won. You sold us out, and you did nothing for us,” read the pamphlets.

But Toto's ire was directed at the wrong target. By that time, plans for Venezuela's gold sector were being controlled at the national level.

The Golden Arc

The state's attempts to bring the Toto's gang and other sindicatos to heel were part of a broader scheme for Venezuela's gold trade.

In February 2016, Maduro had launched a new strategy to revitalize the sector, dubbed the **Orinoco Mining Arc** (Arco Minero del Orinoco – AMO). The project sought to boost mineral extraction throughout a swathe of southern Venezuela by inviting international mining companies to enter into joint ventures with the Venezuelan state. Ownership would be split **45-55 percent**, with the government keeping the lion's share.

When the legal framework for the AMO was solidified in 2017, the government announced the mining industry would be “**the answer to the economic war**” of US sanctions and a move toward a post-petroleum Venezuela.

But the corrupt and conflict-wracked mining sector proved a hard sell to international businesses. What little **corporate interest** there was **evaporated** when international sanctions started to bite.

The only significant investments came not in mining operations but in new processing plants, which used a cyanide-based process to extract a higher percentage of gold from the raw material. This promised more efficient gold processing in the future, but it also offered quick profits by allowing gold to be extracted from the tailings – or residues – of previous mining operations.

“When [the AMO] was created, the goal was that they could exploit and produce gold as well, but all they did was put up those plants,” a local mining engineer told InSight Crime. “But they don’t have mines. You have to have a mine to have something to process in the plants.”

According to multiple media investigations, Cyanidation plants increased rapidly as they were backed by senior figures within the regime and their associates and allies. In the absence of industrial mining, the actors who controlled the plants instead focused on obtaining tailings from the waste piles and tailings lakes around the old Minerven mines and those left behind by the rustic processing mills operated by small-scale miners. For both, they had little choice but to negotiate with the sindicatos that controlled the territories.

“They’re doing mining in reverse,” a mining economist told InSight Crime. “First, they put up the processing plant, and then they go looking for material.”

With the joint ventures ran aground and the tailings representing a windfall that would soon be exhausted, the state developed a new plan: “**strategic alliances**.” This form of mining concession assigns to companies or individuals areas to secure and exploit by whatever means they can in exchange for sharing a percentage of the production with the **Venezuelan Mining Corporation** (Corporación Venezolana de Minería – CVM), the agency charged with maintaining the flow of gold to Venezuelan state coffers.

These secretive contracts lured even more actors into El Callao. In 2018, the Ministry for Ecological Mining Development had registered **295 such agreements** in Bolívar. One year later, this had risen to **over 1,000**. But few had any experience in mining. Instead, they were a motley assortment of military cronies and chancers, keen to try their luck.

The CVM could not afford to be picky. Having failed to attract investors of quality, the new strategy was quantity. The more people tried their luck, the more likely that at least a handful would strike the jackpot – and deliver a cut to the CVM. But as ever more self-interested actors piled into the AMO, illicit trafficking ran rampant, and internal tensions spiraled.

Fool’s Gold for Governors

Against this backdrop, Maduro’s gift of gold mines to his governors may have seemed grandiose, but it was born of desperation.

When announcing the initiative, Maduro declared that it would represent “**a new model of strategic alliance**.” While his exact intentions are unknown, it is possible that he hoped these political loyalists would prove more

trustworthy partners in developing the concessions. However, any hope that the governors would bring the investment needed to revitalize Bolívar's gold sector was badly misguided.

"[The governors] thought they were going to land and find a site with a mine and a fully-functioning processing plant producing bars of gold," a mining engineer, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, laughed. "When they saw they would have to put money into it, that killed the project before it was born."

Some of the governors, though, saw a different kind of business opportunity.

At the beginning of November 2019, Jorge Luis García Carneiro, then governor of the coastal state of Vargas, arrived in Bolívar. Instead of setting up a new mining operation, García took control of the existing [La Gloria mine](#), one of the richest in El Callao.

"There was a gold boom in La Gloria, but it was taken by the government," explained a resident of El Callao, who did not want to be identified for security reasons. "They drove out the criminals, and they put in their own people."

"The gang in El Perú is the only one that does not pay the state."

La Gloria was not within Toto's territory, but the takeover sent a clear message to El Callao's sindicatos. They could either work with Maduro's allies or not at all.

"The strategic alliance thing is just a pseudonym that the government gives to these organizations," a miner in El Callao, who asked to remain anonymous out of fears for his safety, told InSight Crime. "The organization works with the thugs, and the thugs are the ones that put the miners to work. They're the ones that control the population. The thugs form part of the alliance because if not, the government kills them. It's that simple."

By this time, there was growing evidence that it was not only the Venezuelan security forces enforcing this arrangement but also Colombian guerrillas. In his November 2019 message, Toto [called out this arrangement](#), accusing Governor Noguera of working with the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – [ELN](#)) to take their territories.

Other sindicatos saw little choice but to fall in line, but Toto was not prepared to capitulate. Days after the visit by García Carneiro, the former governor, Toto issued his ultimatum to Hurtado as his gunmen terrorized the town. This brought plenty of attention as Toto and his gang became the military's top target.

“The gang in El Perú is the only one that does not pay the state,” a former army officer who served in El Callao, speaking on condition of anonymity, said bluntly. “So, we had the green light for war.”

El Callao was **militarized**. The majority of its shops and public buildings closed down. Hurtado went into hiding but did not resign. By the end of the year, a tense calm had been restored, but it did not last long.

The façade of peace in El Callao was shattered by the killing of a 76-year-old calypso musician. Carlos Clark, who for years had run a legal mining operation in the area, was gunned down in the street on May 8, 2020. Clark had been named part of Bolívar’s “**living cultural heritage**” and was a popular figure locally. His murder sent shockwaves through the town.

Local authorities were quick to **blame** Toto’s gang for the murder, claiming they killed Clark because he refused to pay the gang’s extortion demands. But after his death, the state took possession of his mine then turned it over to Mibiturven, a joint venture with **connections to Alex Saab**, the man accused of being the **Maduro regime’s top money launderer**. As a result, many in the region doubt the official version of events.

*“With the forces we have,
we’re capable of defending
our land.”*

“They say that it was hitmen from Toto’s gang [who killed Clark], but you have to look at who benefited from that killing, in whose hands the mine ended up,” a local opposition political leader, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime.

Clark’s murder acted as a trigger for **intensified police operations** targeting Toto’s gang and their network.

The conflict once again ignited, and months of bloody clashes between the security forces and Toto’s gang followed, with **numerous deaths** on both sides, **weapons seized** and dozens of **gang members arrested**.

By September 2020, Toto appeared to be on his knees. In a striking shift in tactics for the gang, he **released a video** appealing for peace. Seated at a plastic table in the jungle, flanked by heavily-armed youths and with a Venezuelan flag as a backdrop, a masked man addressed the camera.

“On behalf of El Perú, we’re calling for dialogue because we have found ourselves in a senseless war for defending our human rights, our work, our people,” he read from a sheet of paper. “We don’t want more deaths; we want the bloodshed to stop.”

But the plea was also a threat.

“This doesn’t mean we’re not prepared for war,” he warned. “With the forces we have, we’re capable of defending our land.”

The government did not acknowledge the video. Days later, two gang members were **gunned down** by military units in El Perú, quickly followed by **13 arrests**. The attacks continued for months.

Toto’s appeal had been rejected.

An Unlikely Defender of Human Rights

On March 27, 2021, armed men **intercepted** a former congressman, Wuihelm Torrellas Martínez, as he drove down the main street of El Perú. Torrellas and his bodyguard were abducted to a mountainous area outside of El Callao, long used as a hideout by Toto’s gang.

According to Torrellas’ account to authorities, recounted by local journalist **Pableysa Ostos**, his captors accused him of being an informant for Venezuela’s Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (Dirección de Contrainteligencia Militar – DGCIM). They demanded 15 kilograms of gold for his release. When the ransom was not forthcoming, they beheaded Torrellas’ bodyguard.

Torrellas claimed that he managed to escape his captors in the early hours of the morning and hide out in the mountains until sunrise.

Days later, a military unit was dispatched to the site where Torrellas had been held. They found the site abandoned, with Torrellas’ truck parked outside. One of the officers opened the **driver’s door**. It was boobytrapped with a grenade, an official assigned to the case told Ostos. Four officers were injured in the explosion.

The incident was a vivid demonstration that after more than a year of military pressure, Toto was still capable of humiliating state forces that sought to dislodge him.

Increasingly, his fury seemed to be concentrated on the DGCIM. As the chaos spiraled in the AMO, Venezuela’s feared military counterintelligence unit had been taking an ever-greater role in Bolívar, including coordinating attacks on Toto’s supporters and securing areas won by state forces.

The DGCIM has a dark reputation for disappearances, **torture** and **other abuses**. Unable to defeat Toto himself, the DGCIM turned its repression against the small miners.

“There’s a lot of persecution by the DGCIM against anyone who tries to extract material,” a journalist specializing in the region, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime. “It’s like a police state.”

This has ironically given Toto the chance to play the good guy. In April 2021, he released [another video](#) with a markedly different tone to his previous conciliatory effort.

“Stop the raids, the robberies of stores, gold mills and houses. If not, we’re going to launch a campaign of terror, fear and bombing against all the authorities in El Callao. When tyranny becomes law, rebellion becomes a duty,” the speaker threatened.

From the leader of a small gang, rooted in a single sector of a single municipality in eastern Venezuela, the revolutionary rhetoric was absurd, as was the claim of a murderer and extortionist to be protecting human rights. But it was perhaps no more absurd than Maduro’s plan that state governors could fund broke administrations with their own gold mines.

And despite ongoing [military offensives](#) and [mass arrests](#) of miners, as of this writing, Toto is still holding out in El Perú, sporadically carrying out [acts of spectacular violence](#).

For their part, the governors are giving little sign of life. And with security in disarray and state actors concentrated on pillaging whatever they can, the Maduro government’s grasp on the gold trade seems to be ever more tenuous.



2. Metal Hands and Rubber Feet: Colombian Guerrillas and Venezuelan Gold

Armed men, wearing a red star and the face of Che Guevara, were on the move near Venezuela's border with Guyana. Well-armed and well-trained, they claimed to be from the ELN, the strongest guerrilla group in the region. They soon took on entrenched local gangs, seeking to take control of illegal gold mines. For themselves and for their government backers.

On October 14, 2018, armed men ambushed a group of gold miners near the Corre Gente mine in the municipality of Sifontes, near Venezuela's border with Guyana. Seven were **shot execution-style**, with a single bullet to the head. Sixteen more disappeared.

The massacre was shrouded in mystery. Publicly, **authorities in the state of Bolívar blamed** this massacre on a conflict between local mining gangs, especially that led that by local gangster Jhosué Zurita, alias "El Coporo." But survivors and relatives of the victims who spoke to **local journalists** and **representatives** of Venezuela's political opposition voiced a **different story**: the Corre Gente mine had been taken over by a Colombian guerrilla group a long way from home – the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN).

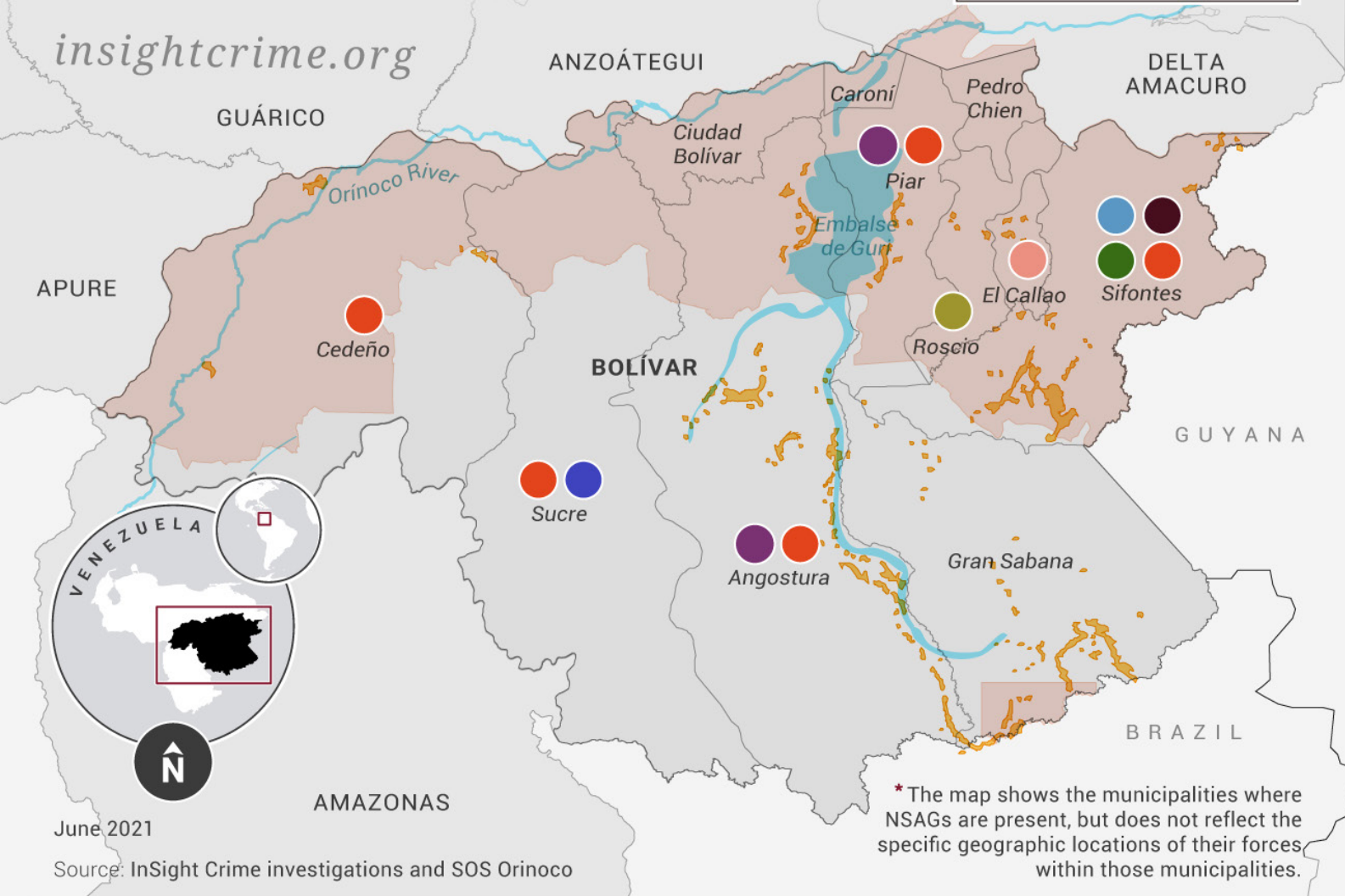
A year later, Lieutenant Colonel Ernesto Solís, then-commander of the nearby Tarabay military base, granted a rare interview to InSight Crime. His account of the events leading up to the massacre, while ambiguous, acknowledged that the group that committed the massacre was no ordinary gang but a guerrilla group calling itself the Che Guevara Movement.

Illegal Mining and Criminal Presence in Bolívar

insightcrime.org

ORINOCO MINING ARC

MINING ZONES



June 2021

Source: InSight Crime investigations and SOS Orinoco

* The map shows the municipalities where NSAGs are present, but does not reflect the specific geographic locations of their forces within those municipalities.

NSAG MUNICIPAL PRESENCE	NSAG STRONGHOLD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Johan Petrica Megabanda ● Sindicato de El Perú ● Tren de Guayana ● ELN / Independent Guerrilla Groups ● Negro Fabio Gang ● 3Rs Organization ● El Ciego Gang ● FARC dissidents 	

“Coporo sent an invitation to those Che Guevara people: ‘Let’s have a meeting to divide up territories’... Five went, and they killed four, and one escaped,” Solís told InSight Crime. “What did the group do? They went to the crossroads and blocked the road... [Coporo] tried to infiltrate the people entering [the mining zone], but the guerrillas knew who they were. They killed those seven (people): two women and five men.”

The Corre Gente massacre brought widespread attention to a rumor that was already rapidly gaining pace in Bolívar: The ELN was advancing on Venezuela’s mining heartland and had been invited to do so by the government. Their goal: to bring order to Venezuela’s anarchic mining region and channel its riches to the Chavista elite.

But three years on, it appears that the region’s most powerful guerrilla group has not come close to taming Bolívar.

Arrival of the Guerrillas

Colombia’s guerrillas may have been a long way from home in eastern Venezuela, but they were in [familiar economic territory](#).

In the neighboring state of Amazonas, which borders Colombia, indigenous communities reported incursions into illegal gold mines by dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) for at least [five years](#). When the FARC demobilized after signing peace accords with the Colombian government in 2016, it created an opening for Colombia’s second-largest guerrilla army – the ELN.

According to the newspaper [El Tiempo](#), in a report corroborated by a former Colombian government official in the border region who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, the ELN’s push into Amazonas was negotiated with dissidents from the FARC peace process who had refused to demobilize. InSight Crime has referred to these dissident elements as the [ex-FARC Mafia](#).

But the FARC dissidents were not the ELN’s only allies. In recordings [published by Venezuelan investigative media outlet ArmandoInfo](#) in 2021, which were recorded in early 2020, an ELN commander explained to an indigenous assembly about the guerrillas’ agenda in the region.

SEE ALSO: [Southern Venezuela: A ‘Gold Mine’ for Organized Crime](#)

“Is there a commitment to the Venezuelan state? Yes, there is,” he declared. “This country faces a threat of possible invasion. The country needs friends, allies, collaborators, servants and neighbors; that’s why the ELN and the FARC are here.”

The audio recordings also hinted at the nature of the relationship between the guerrillas and the Venezuelan state. In 2016, the government of President Nicolás Maduro had opened large swathes of Bolívar to the exploitation of gold, coltan and other minerals in a drive to prop up Venezuela's flagging finances. The project was known as the Orinoco Mining Arc (Arco Minero del Orinoco – AMO).

“We’ve had meetings with 75 leaders of indigenous mining communities in Caicara, Manapiare, Parguaza and El Burro,” a guerrilla commander said. “Who leads these meetings? The government. Who is invited? The ELN and the FARC...What does the Mining Arc need? Security in the territory. Security can’t be provided by thugs or paramilitaries. It’s provided by the security forces, the government, indigenous people and friendly revolutionary organizations.”

“They are better prepared for war than the army itself.”

The areas the commander mentioned are remote indigenous regions in the border region between Amazonas and Bolívar, far removed from Venezuela's historic mining heartland in eastern Bolívar. But by mid-2018, very similar reports were emerging some 800 kilometers from the Colombian border, in the far east of one of Bolívar's most gold-rich municipalities, Sifontes.

“You can see them at the entrance to the Hoja de Lata sector, in Anacoco and San Martín de Turumbán. They wear camouflage trousers, boots and a black shirt. There are not only people with Colombian accents [but] also indigenous people. They are already recruiting,” [El Universal](#) quoted a local resident saying in May 2018.

The mysterious Colombians did not identify publicly with any known guerrilla group, but their rhetoric was familiar.

“They told me that they were here to defend the nation against any foreign invasion. They rule over specific places where the government has granted them a share of mining,” a religious leader in Sifontes told InSight Crime, under condition of anonymity.

“They have good weapons and are very well-trained. They are better prepared for war than the army itself,” he added.

The affiliations and origins of the guerrillas were veiled in confusion, and on the ground, only a small number of miners, opposition representatives and journalists who spoke to InSight Crime named the ELN. But numerous local miners and residents confirmed that new criminal actors were moving in on Bolívar's mining zones: mysterious guerrillas whose waterproof boots earned them the nickname *patas de goma* (rubber feet).

In the interview with Solís, the lieutenant colonel also pointed to two distinct and previously unheard-of groups: the Che Guevara Movement and the Hugo Chávez Frías Revolutionary Group. InSight Crime corroborated these names with local social leaders and researchers.

“To me, they are not guerrillas, but thugs,” Solís told InSight Crime in early 2020 when he was commander of the Tarabay military base. “If the ELN was here, no other group would last a week.”

But an indigenous representative from San Martín de Turumbán in eastern Sifontes, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, told a different story.

*“If someone is drunk
on Monday, they
punish them.”*

“They identified as ELN,” she insisted to InSight Crime. “They didn’t say the name, but they had ELN on their clothes. They had a cap with a red star and the face of Che Guevara.”

The representative described how the guerrillas convinced indigenous leaders to allow them in, telling them bad elements were operating within the community.

“We gave them permission to enter, unarmed, to keep an eye on security,” she said. “But then, they started to take on other roles. They started to control the fuel going to Guyana, charge extortions, and go into the mines. They wanted to control the mines, and they succeeded.”

Once in control, the guerrillas set about imposing order in the previously chaotic gold mines.

“They have a hut where they register you, check your pockets to see you’re not carrying any weapons or drugs,” a former worker from a guerrilla-controlled mine, who did not want to be identified for security reasons, explained. “You can only drink on Saturday and Sunday, and after midnight on Sunday, you can’t drink. If someone is drunk on Monday, they punish them.”

Although the guerrillas’ rule was strict, local miners, social leaders and researchers agreed that it was fairer than the gang rule of the past. Punishments were forced labor, not mutilation. Protection payments were standardized, not capricious. Recruitment was voluntary, not coerced.

The Guerrillas, the Military and the Sindicatos

From the beginning, there were signs that the guerrillas' interests in eastern Bolívar went beyond controlling local mines.

"They talk [of politics] when there are meetings," the miner told InSight Crime. "The meetings are every week, sometimes every 15 days. They say it's all for the Mining Arc. That a company will come to bring machines to do open cast mining."

The political opposition also echoed the notion that the guerrilla advance was intertwined with Maduro's plans to revive the mining sector by attracting investment to the AMO.

"Big multinationals have demanded more security in the area to invest," opposition representative Américo de Grazia told [El Nuevo Herald](#) in 2018. «And the state is trying to guarantee that security by using the ELN, who they believe is more reliable than the gangs.

"The ELN has launched an all-out offensive to eliminate the gangs, allowing the armed forces not to get their hands dirty," de Grazia added.

The arrival of the guerrillas coincided with a major shift in the state's approach to the mining gangs that had long controlled the regional gold trade - the *sindicatos* (unions).

In [June 2018](#), the [government announced](#) a massive security crackdown on the gold sector, issuing a list of targets that included many of the illegal gold traffickers who had been allowed to flourish under Bolívar's allegedly corrupt former governor, General Francisco Rangel Gómez. It was dubbed Operación Manos de Metal (Operation Metal Hands).

Many of Bolívar's [homegrown sindicatos](#) abruptly went from criminal allies to enemies of the state. There was a proliferation of bloody clashes as military units sought to drive out the powerful gangs that had long controlled Bolívar's illegal gold mines. Many of the incidents showed a similar pattern.

"Local people denounced that ELN guerrillas worked in tandem with state security forces," local journalist [Germán Dam](#) reported on Twitter after 100 security forces agents raided the [El Salto mine](#) in the municipality of El Callao. "The former attacked in the early morning, and later the army and police units did likewise."

"[The military] said December 20 was an ultimatum for the whole mining population to get out."

The pattern of apparently coordinated assaults **continued into 2019 and 2020**. Several of Bolívar's once-powerful gang leaders fled the onslaught, only to be **brought down by security forces** in distant states of Venezuela.

The epicenter of activity remained Sifontes, where Solís, who had **become notorious** for allegedly ordering forced disappearances and extrajudicial executions, faced accusations he was using the Tarabay military base as a **hub for coordinating** with the **guerrillas**.

In December 2019, miners gathered in Sifontes' municipal capital of Tumeremo, shouting and bearing placards. Their demand: the immediate departure of Solís from the Tarabay military base on the outskirts of the town.

“Solís is the head of the guerrillas,” **one sign read**.

Since the massacre in Corre Gente, the protesters claimed, the army had taken control of **over 30 mines** between Tumeremo and the Guyana border, blocking entry to local miners.

“[The military] said December 20 was an ultimatum for the whole mining population to get out, and anybody who was in the mines after that would be killed,” a community leader in Tumeremo, who asked not to be identified for security reasons, told InSight Crime in early 2020. “The commander [Solís] said to me: ‘I have a presidential order to close the mines because currently, the government doesn't depend on oil, but on gold.’”

“Now, access to artisanal mining is closed, but priority is given to the machines the government has put in there,” he added.

A Vanishing Army

The Tumeremo blockade and the military takeover of mines appeared to confirm that the ELN had marched on Bolívar to help the government wrest control of the state's riches from the sindicatos and prepare the ground for Maduro's Orinoco Mining Arc.

But the mining machines and multinational investors did not appear. Instead, concessions were handed out to anyone with political and military connections in “strategic alliances” with authorities. And the guerrilla presence began to dissipate, while many of the sindicatos remained as firmly entrenched as ever.

In some regions of Bolívar, the guerrillas had simply been unable to break the mining gangs' resistance.

“In El Callao, they tried to take [the sector] El Perú, but the El Perú gang has been there for years. They know their area well, and they are very, very well-armed,” a local journalist, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, explained. “There have been clashes, firefights, but the guerrillas have not been able to enter El Callao.”

In others, though, the guerrillas seemed to relinquish control of the mines they had seized.

“They told me they kicked them out.”

The mine of Cicapra, in the Guasipati region, was one of the first to be **reportedly taken over** by the ELN-military alliance. But when InSight Crime visited the area in early 2020, local miners, gold traders, engineers and government officials all confirmed that the mine was not in the hands of the guerrillas but one of the most powerful local sindicatos, **Tren de Guayana**.

At most, there were tentative suggestions that the ELN may have been working alongside the group.

“When I was in Cicapra, there were some people in military dress there as well,” one miner, who did not want to be identified over security fears, said. “Colombian people. I don’t know who they were. They had a weapon that was like a mini-machine gun.”

“You have to cross the river to enter the mine, they check you there, they ask you about everything,” the miner added.

Other sources also suggested the guerrillas had been taking on a supporting role with allied sindicatos.

“Some [gangs] are enemies [of the guerrillas], and some are allies,” said a retired Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB) officer who served in Bolívar. “There are systems [gangs] under training from the guerrillas. There are other systems who are training against the guerrillas.”

The guerrillas even began to disappear from the more distant areas near the Guyana border, where they had **invested** in controlling mines and establishing bases in communities.

“[The guerrillas] are not here anymore,” said the indigenous woman in San Martín de Turumbán. “They told me they kicked them out.”

Many of the sindicatos, however, remain. Some of them are led by gang bosses whose names appeared on the list of targets for Operation Manos de Metal

but were never truly targeted. Others had leaders who had been left off the list altogether. A handful of holdouts continue to resist the security forces' pressure.

In this light, many in the region believe, *Manos de Metal* and the guerrilla assault was not a serious move to remove Bolívar's sindicatos but a strategic ploy to force them to collaborate with the government.

"The goal was to displace groups who wouldn't fit into the system. They would simply take one out if it wasn't producing or wasn't investing," said the Venezuelan mining economist. "It was about consolidating power, rather than a system to improve gold mining."

The guerrillas appear to have played a role as shock troops or enforcers as part of this strategy. But spread thin and hundreds of kilometers from their core units on the Colombian border, they were always going to struggle to control such fiercely-contested territory.

However, the ELN has not disappeared from Bolívar completely. In addition to the sporadic reports of checkpoints or mysterious men in camouflage and rubber boots supporting sindicatos, there are signs the guerrillas have been seeking opportunities to profit from Bolívar's gold in less hostile terrain.

In mid-2020, the government announced a new legal initiative declaring six rivers in central and western Bolívar open for gold extraction. In the weeks after it passed, indigenous communities in the Caura River basin denounced the appearance of new [mining dredges](#) – rafts that suck up the river bed to filter out the gold it contains.

The protests were met with violence, and [indigenous representatives reported](#) that an armed group linked to the new mining operations had attacked one of the communities, killing three people. Although the statement did not name the group responsible, local opposition representative [Américo de Grazia](#) claimed the ELN was behind the violence once again.

Sources with knowledge of dynamics in the Caura basin confirmed the ELN presence, saying they were dividing up the territory with FARC dissidents.


"It's the guerrillas who have control in the mines of Caura," an environmental researcher, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime. His account was corroborated by a miner from the region, who also asked to remain anonymous.

The Caura basin is remote and relatively uncontested, home to marginalized [indigenous groups](#), with whom the ELN has long sought to foster relations of collaboration and submission and hundreds of kilometers closer to the guerrillas' core units. For now, it seems, the guerrillas are back in their comfort zone.

Back in Bolívar's mining heartland, in the municipality of Sifontes, the ELN's alleged military collaborator Solís has been murdered, and there is barely a trace left of the Colombian guerrillas.

"For me, it's a myth," was a typical reply from a resident of Tumeremo, who asked to remain anonymous out of security fears when pressed about the guerrillas. "Maybe at one time there were some dissidents, or guerrillas or Colombians. A small group, over in the area of Bochinche [Corre Gente]. But now, no. Absolutely not."

Instead, a new sindicato has risen up to control Tumeremo. Known only as the R Organization (Organización R – OR), the group's rhetoric has included a now-familiar pledge: to bring order to the chaos. But this time, the group claims, it will not be for the benefit of corrupt elites and predatory gangs but for the miners themselves.



3. ‘The Rebel of the South’: Rise of the R Organization

The sindicatos of Bolívar, gangs that control illegal gold mining, are ruthless. Running operations with an iron fist, they force miners, adults and children alike, to work long hours in unsafe conditions and for little reward. But facing a campaign of violence from Venezuelan armed forces seeking to take over the gold trade, one sindicato stood out. Organization R has become part criminal group, part community organization and part political force.

At around 11 p.m. on April 6, 2020, Lieutenant Colonel Ernesto Solís was returning to the military base he commanded near the town of Tumeremo in the eastern Venezuela state of Bolívar. There he was **intercepted by gunmen on motorbikes** who riddled his car with bullets. The attack left Solís and the sergeant that accompanied him dead.

Solís’ death had an air of inevitability to it. In his role directing military operations in one of Venezuela’s most fiercely contested gold mining regions, he had faced numerous accusations of abuses and alliances with armed groups. He had already survived previous attacks on his life, according to his own account. He had many enemies.

The police **quickly made it clear** which of those enemies they believed to be responsible for the ambush: the R Organization (Organización R – OR) and its leader, **Eduardo José Natera Balboa**, alias “Run” or “Pelón Natera.”

At the time, few outside of Bolívar had heard of the OR. Reports from the region were more concerned with the military’s efforts to seize control of the region’s gold trade from criminal gangs in a campaign directed by the inner circle of President Nicolás Maduro and, media investigations and local sources **alleged**, coordinated with Colombian guerrillas.

Today, though, the OR has skillfully blended armed force with social work and political action to position itself as one of the leading powers in Bolívar’s mining heartland. In doing so, it has exposed the failures of the Maduro regime’s strategy to turn Bolívar’s lawless mining sector into an economic powerhouse that could both prop up Venezuela’s spiraling economy and line the pockets of its corrupt elites.

Who’s Who In and Around Organization R

Organization R (OR) has become a crucial player in Venezuela’s gold mining state of Bolívar. Created from mining gangs, the group states it defends mining communities but takes a cut of any gold produced. Its charitable wing, known as the 3Rs Foundation, has connections to the Movement for Peace and Life, a government initiative promoting culture and sport.



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insightcrime.org

Source: InSight Crime investigations, Venezuela police

From the Soccer Field to the Battlefield

For more than a decade, the riches of Venezuela’s gold mining heartland in Bolívar have been fought over by criminal gangs – known locally as sindicatos (unions). But from the start, the OR was different.

The group’s founder, Run, was better known as a player for the local soccer team. But he had a criminal history stretching for more than a decade. In 2009, he was convicted of a series of petty crimes, but he escaped from the local El Dorado prison.

Run formed the OR, also known as the 3Rs, from the remnants of mining gangs that had previously run the trade in Tumeremo, according to Américo de

Grazia, a local leader of the political opposition. He strengthened the group by recruiting deserters from the Venezuelan military, a senior Bolívar state government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime.

“Of all the gangs operating in Bolívar, for me, OR is the best organized because they have a tremendous logistical capacity and Colombian-style training,” the official said.

Run also sought to win the support of the local community in Tumeremo by handing out food and children’s toys; organizing sporting events and activities for the local youth; carrying out or helping improve public services, and even funding a local ambulance service.

This social work was carried out under the banner of a charitable organization, the 3Rs Foundation. Although both the foundation and the armed group fiercely deny any links publicly, an OR member, who InSight Crime interviewed via WhatsApp on condition of anonymity, confirmed what in Bolívar is common knowledge, and something that the OR has in the past recognized: They are two faces of the same organization.

“On the computer, they had a census of all the people involved in gold sales. Everything, absolutely everything was accounted for.”

“Everything that the town needs, we make it appear through the Foundation,” he said.

The OR also took a different approach to mining. Whereas most sindicatos focus on squeezing every last drop of profits from the trade at gunpoint, the OR has positioned itself as a defender of the miners and mining communities.

“We are youths who are worried about the lack of order in the mines and the disrespect for other people,” said a 3Rs leader, who agreed to answer InSight Crime’s questions by email on condition of anonymity. “We have proposed to bring order, based on respect for others, respect for women and children, respect for the work, the need to honor debts, respect for people’s religion, for children’s right to education and recreation, and the respect for the health of the mining population.”

However, the OR’s version of “order” comes at a price. According to the OR member contacted via WhatsApp, that price is 15 percent of gold production. The OR also tightly regulates the commercial activity down to the price. One communique issued to the community obtained by InSight Crime begins with: “We are updating gold prices in dollars, cash and transfers.” After listing the new prices, the statement concludes: “The prices established by the OR must be respected. In the case that they are not, corrective measures will be applied as necessary.”

For those living in OR territory, “corrective measures” reads as a barely concealed threat as the rules are brutally enforced. In one OR video that circulated around Bolívar, a half-naked man is shown clutching his head with a sign around his neck reading: “Do not hit women.” Prompted by a voice behind the camera, he confesses to beating his partner. “There will be no next time,” the voice warns him.

However, compared to the “justice” meted out by other mining gangs, which includes mutilation and dismemberment, according to [evidence collected by human rights groups](#), such punishments seem relatively humane to many in Bolívar. Despite the financial cost and the harshness of the group’s extrajudicial justice, many of the residents and miners interviewed by InSight Crime welcomed the security the group has provided.

“There is no more extortion, no more kidnappings, all these things that we had to live with, the harassment, the persecution, that has ended,” said one Tumeremo resident, who did not want to be identified for security reasons.

When InSight Crime interviewed Solís three months before his murder, he described how the OR had become a formidable enemy by mixing armed power with social outreach. A supportive local population was acting as an intelligence network for the group, giving it a vital advantage over the security forces and criminal rivals.

But it was his description of the time he visited the local offices of the political party, the Venezuelan Popular Unity (Unidad Popular Venezolana – UPV) – a member of the coalition of leftist parties supportive of the Chavista government – that revealed just how far their reach extended.

“On the outside, the office was UPV, but inside it was all OR. The documents said ‘Organización R,’” he said. «On the computer, they had a census of all the people involved in gold sales. Everything, absolutely everything was accounted for.»

The coopting of the local branch of UPV – [confirmed in the OR’s own public statements](#) – was not the limit of the group’s political aspirations. The 3Rs Foundation has also worked closely with the Movement for Peace and Life ([Movimiento por la Paz y la Vida](#)), a national government program that promotes cultural and sport programs in disadvantaged communities.

The program head is a former professional basketball player and ex-vice minister for sport, [Alexander Vargas](#), who was appointed to the role directly by the Office of the President. The social media feeds of both Vargas and the 3Rs Foundation feature videos of him [inaugurating sports facilities](#) and [health programs](#) in the company of 3Rs Foundation representatives.

Maduro's Mirage

The OR's offer to bring order and security was perfectly timed to appeal to Bolívar's mining communities, exhausted by years of violence and turmoil at the hands of criminal groups and security forces.

When the group began its expansion in 2019, it was becoming clear the Maduro government's grand plans to build a thriving gold mining sector in what the government called the [Orinoco Mining Arc](#) (Arco Minero del Orinoco – AMO) were little more than a mirage.

The government had failed to bring in either the capital or the technical expertise needed to turn an unregulated, low-tech mining sector into a modern industry. Instead, it had brought in an ever-growing number of actors from the Chavista elite, granting access to the region's wealth to everyone from the [president's family](#) to [state governors](#).

“[The Maduro regime has been] dividing up the state as if it were their territory. Everyone receives part of the loot,” said a former military official who occupied a senior command position in Bolívar before retiring and who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

*“We all have a price.
It might be money,
or it might be family,
but **we have a price.**”*

Bolívar's gold also began to fund a shadow payroll for security forces. Rank-and-file security officials are [paid a poverty wage](#) by the near-bankrupt Venezuelan state, so many instead make a living by taking a cut of criminal economies in the areas where they are posted. A constant

rotation of personnel sees these opportunities distributed throughout the forces. Bolívar's mining region is now one of the most coveted postings in the country, according to the retired military official.

“When I first came to the south of Bolívar, it was as a punishment,” he said. “Now, people fight over it as if it were a prize.”

The region was soon flooded with different branches of the security forces, including the military, the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB), police and intelligence services. There is strong [evidence](#) the military initially worked with Colombia guerrillas to combat the sindicatos. But as the guerrilla presence began to dissipate, security force units struck up alliances with the sindicatos, turning their guns only on those who would not cooperate or pay them off.

InSight Crime spoke to numerous sources in Bolívar who did not wish to be named, among them active and retired military and police service personnel, who described how each branch of the security forces has found its own way of profiting from the trade through the deals they make with sindicatos and other actors behind the mining operations.

Some work directly with criminal groups to control or extort mines, while others protect the interests of political and military elites. Others take on more specialist roles, such as charging those moving contraband gasoline into the region or gold out of the region or by squashing ongoing investigations into murders and other crimes.

Even those who are not corrupt when they arrive in Bolivar soon are enticed by the system, according to an active military official recently stationed in Bolívar, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

“We all have a price. It might be money, or it might be family, but we have a price,” he said. “Not everyone is bought with gold. With others, they say, ‘You pass me information, or I will kill you and your family, and I will chop you into pieces.’”

But now, a new problem is arising. There may not be enough riches to go around. Informal miners have been exhausting easily accessible gold deposits near the surface, mining experts in the region told InSight Crime, and the promised technologically advanced operations that could dig deeper have failed to appear.

As a result, the Chavista elites and the numerous branches of the security forces have found themselves in competition over dwindling resources, not only with sindicatos but also with each other.

“It is total chaos, a conflict in which the winner is the person who has the most power, who is closest to those at the top,” said the retired military official.

War and Peace

In Sifontes, Solís came to embody these tensions. Local communities accused him of being responsible for extrajudicial killings and disappearances and alleged he was collaborating with the Colombian guerrillas. The situation reached a crisis point when in December 2019, the military took over local mines and blockaded access routes to them.

For the OR, he had become the main obstacle to their takeover of Tumeremo.

“Solís made our lives impossible, he didn’t let us work,” said the OR member. “He killed too many innocent people, which is something Run does not do.”

Solís’ murder not only paved the way for the OR to seize control of Tumeremo. It also marked the start of their expansion into new regions, as they advanced into the north of Sifontes and pushed into the neighboring municipality of El Callao.

This advance soon earned them new enemies as they moved into territories controlled by one of the region’s oldest and most powerful sindicatos: Tren de Guayana.

In the past, Tren de Guayana had received support from former Bolívar governor Francisco Rangel Gómez, according to [testimonies of whistleblowers from within the security forces](#). Media investigations and miners in the region allege that the gang continues to count on the support of allies in power today. There have even been accusations that Tren de Guayana has coordinated operations with a faction of the military and employs current and former soldiers as mercenaries.

“Each side will stay in its area. We’re not friends. We’re not anything.”

Despite having to confront both an armed criminal group and the military, the OR drove their new enemies from at least three mines in months of [clashes](#). Yet while they displayed their military prowess, high-powered arsenal and willingness to use deadly violence, the OR again painted its expansion as a righteous campaign to protect miners from the predatory Tren de Guayana and their military allies.

“The Tren de Guayana rob people. They disrespect women and children. They don’t respect public spaces, and they abuse the workers,” the OR leader said.

Once again, their rhetoric has been echoed by the miners themselves. After the OR had [ended](#) Tren de Guayana’s control of a mine located between Tumeremo and the Tren de Guayana stronghold of Guasipati, the miners staged a press conference.

“Thanks to the R Organization, who freed us from the slavery of Tren de Guayana!” said one of the spokespeople. The event ended with the gathered miners chanting “R! R! R!” in unison.

After months of bitter fighting, the conflict came to an abrupt end in September – or at least a pause. The OR [released a statement](#) declaring they had reached a peace agreement with Tren de Guayana and the government. According to

the statement, the areas around the mines they had fought over would now be “peace zones,” free from armed groups.

The rivals remain enemies, Run told InSight Crime, responding by WhatsApp to written questions. But the fight, for the moment, was over.

“Everyone wants peace,” he said. “[But] the relationship hasn’t changed. Each side will stay in its area. We’re not friends. We’re not anything.”

A New Partnership?

The announcement of the truce came as a surprise, as the OR appeared to have the upper hand in the conflict. The most striking aspect, though, was the role of the [Venezuelan Mining Corporation](#) (Corporación Venezolana de Minería – CVM), which, according to Run, helped broker the agreement and will administer the disputed mines.

As Maduro’s vision of the Orinoco Mining Arc reviving Venezuela’s fortunes has given way to the stark reality of corrupt elites and criminal groups looting natural resources, the CVM is now responsible for ensuring Venezuelan officials continue to get their cut.

The body claims a percentage of the production of every state-authorized mining concession. But according to multiple sources in the region who all spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, it has similar arrangements with the illegal operations run by sindicatos.

The CVM, though, sources say, is getting frustrated as many of the actors behind the mines – above all the military – are not delivering on their side of the bargain.

“There is a strong clash [between the CVM and the military] because the CVM is not collecting what it is due, and the majority of the owners [of the mining operations] are generals,” said the senior Bolívar government official.

The OR, in contrast, has built its reputation on being a reliable partner who can keep the gold flowing. The group appears to have helped deliver control of three mines directly to the CVM’s hands - at least for the time being.

The OR becoming a better ally for the CVM than the military would represent a change for an organization that has cultivated a Robin-Hood image of being righteous outlaws, refusing to play the power games with distant elites and local thugs while standing up for the workers those power blocs exploit.

“Run is the rebel of the south because he doesn’t want to align himself with any security forces nor with any big name in the government,” said the OR member.

The Organization

InSight Crime is a think tank dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime.

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