ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND POWER IN VENEZUELA

Regional impacts, global stakes

Webinar, 15 January 2026[1]

Siria Gastélum Félix, *Resilience Director, GI-TOC*: This latest chapter in Venezuela began with a familiar frame, the war on drugs. But then it shifted again towards narco-terrorism, then to security threats and securing the country's oil resources. And somewhere along the way, the story on organized crime itself became, again, blurred inside the broader geopolitical crisis. But organized crime in Latin America is a significant problem. And over the last decade, Venezuela has been an important vector, and in more criminal markets than just drugs. Venezuela has established itself as a key hub for criminal activity in the continent, where economic crisis, forced migration and institutional weakening have encouraged the expansion of multiple illicit markets. The country operates as a source, transit point and facilitator for activities such as human trafficking, drug trafficking and illegal mining, coordinated by local and transnational networks. Today, we want to bring that story back into focus because this is also a story about organized crime disruption, and the consequences will reach far beyond Venezuela's borders.

Tuesday Reitano, *Managing Director, GI-TOC*: We really wanted to move beyond the headlines, beyond what the US media has to say and what has so far been reported, and the way that the conversation evolved, to look a little bit deeper than the labels and think about actually how power works in Venezuela today and what impact that has on the criminal economy. We're going to start with directing our first question to Rebecca. We know that in the indictment and in a lot of the press prior to the extraction of [Nicolás] Maduro, Maduro had been accused of being the head of a cartel that they called Cartel de los Soles, and now he's gone. In your assessment, how real was that claim? What veracity should we give to it? And what impact is his removal going to have?

> **Rebecca Hanson**, *Assistant Professor, Center for Latin American Studies at University of Florida*: I think Maduro's removal is going to have a lot of impacts, but not because he was the head of this organization, the Cartel de los Soles. The veracity of that claim has come into question just in the most recent indictment, where the United States decided to almost completely remove any claims about Maduro's linkage to that group, because first, there's not really any evidence of it. Secondly, it's a poor

[1] This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

understanding of what that term is. The term 'Cartel de los Soles' started to be used by journalists, probably around the 1990s, to refer to the fact that the military was very corrupt, was involved in illicit activities. So the concept itself, the name itself, actually emerges before [Hugo] Chávez comes into office. So if this group did exist, it would have pre-existed Chávez. But journalists really use this as a term to refer to the fact that, 'look, the military are engaged in illicit activities, in corruption, and we know that under Maduro, that has increased significantly'. So it is absolutely the case that there is much more drug trafficking, much more illicit activities in the country now than what existed before Chavismo.

I think there's a similar issue here. A lot of people refer to Venezuela as a 'narco-state', and I understand why people use this term. Venezuelan state officials are really involved up to their eyeballs in criminal economies. But I think this concept really ends up muddying the waters because it paints an inaccurate portrait of how criminal markets are organized in the country. It's of course the case that military officers are engaged in drug trafficking, but so are many other armed and criminal actors that sometimes coordinate with each other and are oftentimes in conflict with each other. The government doesn't have anything close to a monopoly on drug trafficking, which I think is what the term 'narco-state' would indicate, even if it is the biggest and most important player. And there's not really any single centralized command structure to drug trafficking in the entire country. Instead, what we see is that military officers tend to run their own regional outfits to control different types of illicit economies. Sometimes these regional outfits are coordinated with others, and sometimes they aren't.

I think the lack of evidence of a lot of this stuff is going to start to play out in court proceedings in the next few months or years, however long it takes. Because much of the US's narrative about what criminal markets look like in Venezuela has even been contradicted by its own security agencies. One of the main justifications that [Donald] Trump has used to deport Venezuelans out from the United States and has used to justify bombings in the Caribbean and now this invasion is that Maduro runs the organization Tren de Aragua, or that Maduro has sent members of Tren de Aragua to the United States to destabilize the country. And this is just a really poor misunderstanding of how relationships between the government and criminal groups work. There are absolutely relationships between the Maduro government and criminal organizations, but these tend to be very fragile. They tend to be oriented around shared economic interests, but it's not the case that Maduro was the head of this organized, centralized criminal organization. Instead, what we're talking about are a lot of criminal groups that the government is a part of and relates and connects with and works with, but also competes with.

I think this is very obvious in what's happened with Tren de Aragua in Venezuela over the past few years. Tren de Aragua became a very powerful and important criminal organization in Venezuela for a number of years. They still are, but are less so because the Maduro government invaded the prison that they were based out of. And that really did impact their organizational capacity. This is a good indication that we have criminal organizations in the country that have grown much more powerful, much more consolidated, but then also oftentimes go toe to toe with the Maduro administration. It's much messier on the ground and actually, there'd be a lot less violence in Venezuela if we were talking about one large organization that ran drug trafficking or illicit markets in Venezuela. One of the reasons why we see so much violence is because there's so much competition, there's so much fragmentation, and there are so many groups.

SGF: And this is why we think that labels matter, because of this confusion and what it creates. Felipe, you have also been studying the evolution of Venezuelan crime. How did it get to this point in the organized ecosystem

of the continent? Do you agree that 'narco-state' is a fit label for Venezuela? Why do these labels matter?

Felipe Botero, *Director of the Andean Observatory, GI-TOC*: I want to draw attention to two findings that we can see in our Global Organized Crime Index: Venezuela's scores across all three editions, both for state-embedded actors – those groups that operate as criminal actors from within the state – and for mafia-style groups. Venezuela ranks seventh globally among the countries with the highest scores for the influence of state-embedded actors. And it ranks second for mafia-style groups.

What we see in Venezuela is a country where, although no single actor holds a monopoly, there is a very strong presence of various mafia-type groups, both local and foreign. In Venezuela, it is not only the Tren de Aragua that operates; the ELN [Ejército de Liberación Nacional] also has a very strong presence. Some authors even describe the ELN as a paramilitary group in the Venezuelan context, or as a binational group operating between Colombia and Venezuela. There are also FARC dissidents, and we know that Brazilian groups are active as well.

These powerful and prominent mafia-style groups operate in a context of extremely high state co-optation. Different state actors – not only from the executive branch but also from the military and the judicial system – maintain arrangements that can be observed at the regional level or in specific criminal markets. Because in Venezuela, it's not only cocaine trafficking at play; there is also migrant smuggling, human trafficking and a crucial criminal market to consider: illegal gold mining.

In this context, we understand that Venezuela's criminal ecosystem functions thanks to the mutual validation and cooperation between these two types of actors: strong, present mafia-style groups, and state-embedded actors who enable their operations. Interpreting them as a single actor or assuming they all depend solely on Maduro is, in my view, a limited reading. However, removing Maduro, who had managed to maintain a certain balance within this complex ecosystem, will very likely create disruptions.

TR: There are two lines of issues we want to bring out from your comments, but I'd like to start first looking more at this issue of mafia groups or the dynamics between mafia groups and controllers. I'm sure many of you who are here today know that the GI-TOC publishes a Global Organized Crime Index. That index does a ranking of five types of criminal actors. It was super interesting in the Venezuela profile that we released in November this year, that in the hierarchy of the five, state-embedded actors – so where you would imagine, for example, the infrastructure that Rebecca described, linked to the highest of the state – had a very high score, one of the highest in the world. But actually higher was the ranking for mafia-style actors, which was, again, one of the highest in the world. So we saw a score of 9 and a score of 9.5. I'd like to ask Clavel: We saw a lot of this kind of people on the streets, groups of armed militias. Is that for you what Felipe was describing? Are they criminal? And what does that mean, actually, for the people who live in Venezuela?

Clavel Rangel, *Venezuelan journalist*, *@Red_Amazonia*: Different groups are operating in Venezuela depending on the region and, in many cases, they are operating because there is a state tolerance in that territory. Especially in the south of Venezuela, in the Venezuelan Amazon, where different groups have control of some mines on the border with Colombia or with Brazil. The photos that you have seen this past week are more in Caracas, where these groups have connections with people in power such as Diosdado Cabello, who controls the political police in Venezuela. But that doesn't mean that these groups obey completely these people in power, because they have gained more power in the last few years. For example, in the Venezuelan Amazon, in the last few years, the situation has changed almost monthly, where different groups operated some mine, and then they were displaced by another group with the tolerance of the state, and then they were replaced by the military, or by the ELN, or in some

cases, they just moved.

I was talking with some sources this week about the situation in the south. They told me that right now there is total calm. The *colectivos* in the south of Venezuela, for example, in the gold mines, just called people to stay calm. And told them that they knew the consequences if they went to protest in the street. So this is the kind of control that they have. And this is a dynamic that we saw, mostly after the elections in 2024, when these groups were called for a peace agreement if they controlled the political situation in their regions. Many dynamics are at play. Venezuela's economic crisis, the gold prices, how different groups have been changing in the last years… but they have been operating because some people in the state allowed them to operate in that region. It's not just Maduro, it's not just Cabello, it's the military forces and different generals who also have companies inside the Venezuelan Amazon. It's a multi-factor system involving different people with different businesses and criminal economies linked to the Venezuelan Amazon.

TR: What Clavel describes as this complex ecosystem of different actors has fundamentally been simplified in this extradition removing Maduro. It's not the first time we've seen this 'kingpin strategy' towards criminal groups in Latin America – pick off the top one and then hope it all goes away. I think we have some lessons on this. Cecilia, what would you say on how likely this is to be effective, given the interplays that Rebecca, Clavel and Felipe have described?

Cecilia Farfán-Méndez, *Head of North America Observatory, GI-TOC:* I think in general the concern is that decades of evidence from Latin America, as you point out, precisely show that this idea that you can remove an alleged head and that's going to weaken or effectively disappear an organization is not actually what happens. And the kingpin strategy, in fact, generates more violence because you tend to destabilize existing arrangements of how criminal markets operate. And so what we see is that they tend to generate more violence, and also, criminal organizations over time have adapted to respond to the kingpin strategy. And so we see much more flatter structures. We don't necessarily see that everyone knows what's happening within the organization such that the removal of someone within the group is not going to completely weaken the organization. The proposed policy, rather than focusing on an alleged kingpin – which symbolically makes headlines – is that if you really want to weaken these structures, you ought to remove these management structures and you would want to have an operation, for instance, that goes after many people at the managerial level at the same time, similar to operations against organized crime that we see in the European context. The concern is that, while symbolically it can mean a lot, especially to some law enforcement organizations, we know that the kingpin strategy tends to produce more violence and does not eliminate the criminal market that it seeks to eliminate.

SGF: Cecilia, I have a follow-up question for you because there are a lot of questions about the recent case of Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was extradited and then convicted for similar things, and then pardoned. Does the GI-TOC have any evidence on these accusations? And what are the similarities that we're seeing now that we have another Latin American president in a US prison?

TR: And what do we know about the US's record in prosecuting drug traffickers from Latin America, whether they're presidents or not?

CFM: There's a long history of prosecuting high-level criminals from Latin America in the US. Thirty years ago, extradition was seen as a process that involved justice, and essentially having someone extradited to the US highlighted that justice process. I think now, increasingly, we see demands from the country saying that extraditing people, especially from civil society, is not necessarily providing

justice in this context. Our colleagues at Elementa, for instance, have been very vocal about this, and they have even a project that's called 'Extraditing justice', meaning that if you don't prosecute these criminals in the country where they have committed crimes, in addition to the US, are you really delivering justice? So there's that open-ended question there.

In the case of the Honduran president, what we see is an answer from the Trump administration calling what the Biden administration did as an 'overprosecution'. It will be interesting to see as the Maduro trial – if it gets to that – advances, if there's going to be also arguments around if this is an overprosecution.

But these two cases at least spotlight two things. One is that over time, we have lost our ability to have access to the evidence. One thing that has changed in US courts is that evidence that was presented in cases 40, 30 years ago is no longer accessible. One of the arguments that law enforcement makes is that criminal groups learn from this. They learn how law enforcement learn about their activities, and they don't want to reveal how is it that they found out about this information. We may know some of the facts, but we don't necessarily know the details of how the investigation was carried out like we used to have access to 40–30 years ago. The other thing is that with these cases, it will be interesting to see how different countries react, especially because not everyone recognizes the terrorist designation. Just to underscore that the terrorism designation is seen by some countries as a unilateral measure by the US. Some countries may agree with this designation, other countries may not agree with this, but this is not an international designation of terrorists. This is something that the US has decided they're going to call certain organizations and certain individuals.

SGF: Our introductive video said that Maduro's extraction would actually substantially change the operating environment for organized crime in the region. Let's talk more about that, and borders and illicit markets. To help us make sense of that disruption, I will turn to Eduardo Bechara-Gómez. Eduardo, in your research, you focus on armed conflict and security responses in the Colombia–Venezuela border. What have you been hearing about Colombia, too, as part of this evolving story? And what is happening in the border right now?

Eduardo Bechara-Gómez, *Professor and researcher, Universidad Externado de Colombia – Faculty of Finances, Government and International Relations – School of Government and Public Policy*: Colombia and Venezuela are uneasy neighbours along a troubled border. A troubled border requiring cooperation efforts on behalf of both governments. You may easily think that the best solution for dealing with all the criminal markets in the border region would be cooperation in security affairs involving precisely the security apparatus from Colombia and Venezuela working together. But there is also the issue of the peace efforts in Colombia, in which Venezuela has always been a very relevant actor. I would like to place this on a broader perspective because it's very interesting to see that Venezuela has been present as a key actor in Colombia's peace processes before Hugo Chávez came to power. In 1991, for instance, Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, hosted a series of peace talk with the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, which was a coalition of many rebel groups in Colombia, similar to a certain point to the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional in El Salvador. And later, while Hugo Chávez was in power, Venezuela, during the [Juan Manuel] Santos Calderón government [2010–2014 and 2014–2018] and the peace process with the FARC-EP in La Habana (Cuba), played the role of *país garante* [guarantor state] of the peace process. And also with Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has a special seat with the ELN and with one of the dissidents of the former FARC-EP in the multiple tracks of the Paz Total [Total Peace]. So if we broaden our perspective, we see that there are certain patterns that are not just related to Chávez or to Maduro being in power. Colombia and Venezuela have tried through the peace process to solve the security situation.

On the other hand, let's say that you think that you need cooperation between the security apparatus of the states. That is precisely a very controversial topic between Colombia and Venezuela, because Colombia and Venezuela have repeatedly closed and opened their borders, which is easy to say if you are in Bogotá and in Caracas, you say 'I'm going to close the window because I'm getting too much noise'. But what you see in the border is that nothing is closed, it's a very porous border and it's controlled a lot by state and non-state armed actors on each side of the border.

So what is interesting is what happens now with Maduro being removed from power and Delcy Rodríguez, who seems very pragmatic, being the interim president. What will be the role of Venezuela in the Colombian peace process? Will there be a fundamental change? And what will be the main goal of Venezuela in participating in Colombia's peace processes? Because back in the day, it was clear that there was a need to contain the transborder dimension of Colombia's armed conflict. And through that goal, stabilizing the border, bringing security to the border. With Maduro, I do think that changed. Because, on the Venezuelan side, the borders between the state and the criminal actors became quite blurry. And also the ELN is way more complex. So in terms of the border, what should we expect?

Just to mention briefly some key points, I think that there is some implication in terms of the peace efforts with the ELN and with one of the FARC-EP dissident groups. I was looking, for instance, at official statements from Venezuela, and Colombia is not mentioned in any of that. It's just the relationship between Caracas and Washington DC, at the centre of the discussion. And also what we must expect in the context of the biggest humanitarian crisis of the hemisphere, the exodus of the Venezuelan people, who perhaps fearing reprisals in Venezuela, will start, again, coming to Colombia.

SGF: Staying in Colombia, I'm going to go back to you, Felipe, because Donald Trump is, apparently, rallying against Colombia, and there's been also this diplomatic element to this. Is it true that the transition in Venezuela and the reconstruction of the country depends on cooperation and involvement with Colombia?

FB: At this moment, I feel we have more uncertainty than clarity. What we knew at the time Nicolás Maduro was captured was that there was already a strong diplomatic and political tension between Donald Trump's administration and the government of Gustavo Petro. This tension was heavily shaped by disagreements over the 'war on drugs', Colombia's alleged non-compliance, and the US decision to decertify Colombia. The United States has been increasingly vocal about what it sees as Petro's failure to meet expectations in combating drug trafficking, particularly cocaine trafficking.

After the capture, we've seen some interesting movements in Colombia's international political posture: closer interactions between Petro and Trump, as well as a summons from Colombia's Foreign Relations Advisory Commission bringing together former presidents, essentially signaling the need to take the bilateral relationship with the United States more seriously. There is now a sense of threat arising from what happened in Venezuela, leading to a more unified diplomatic and political response than what we had seen in previous months, when the dynamic was very much driven by President Petro himself.

If Venezuela's transition is going to depend on cooperation with Colombia, I don't think we have a clear answer yet. What we do know is that Colombia and Venezuela are not only neighbouring countries, they share intertwined histories across economic, political, social, cultural, ethnic and racial dimensions, as well as illegal economies. Without a doubt, whatever happens in Venezuela and how this transition unfolds – if it actually does take place – will be closely tied to developments in Colombia and the role Colombia may play.

This will also depend on the meeting scheduled between Trump and Petro in February, and it could

hinge on the outcome of Colombia's presidential elections in May. So, I think it's difficult to predict what will happen. We know there will be an impact, the question is how that impact will manifest.

TR: I see the tension in the different states in terms of the geopolitical implications of this and how they're reading it and what they're likely to do. But Venezuela has more neighbours than that and a far reach in terms of its push out of insecurity, instability and illicit economies. I'd like to invite Gabriel, our Amazon Basin Observatory head, just to give some thoughts about what some of the countries in your region might be seeing.

Gabriel Funari, *Head of Amazon Basin Observatory, GI-TOC:* From the perspective of the Amazon, the big threat that we're seeing is a worsening of these convergences between drug trafficking and illicit gold mining in the region. Because we know – and this is based on ongoing field research that we're undertaking in the Venezuela–Brazil–Guyana triborder region – that these convergences between drug and gold are arguably the biggest threat posed by organized crime in the Amazon today. And Venezuela is playing a central role in these big drug trafficking organizations becoming directly involved in the gold trade. So managing illicit gold mines, providing security services and demanding extraction from other illicit gold miners, and also moving gold into Venezuela. And this is a relatively recent phenomenon, whereas up to two years ago, illicit gold flows were coming out of Venezuela to be exported in Brazil or in Guyana. These flows have now shifted, where gold that's illicitly mined in the region, including Guyana and Brazil, is now being sent to Venezuela to be exported overseas outside of South America to many destinations, including China, UAE and other places. And the current Venezuelan regime is playing a major role in these convergences. So a lot of the buyers on the Venezuelan side that are buying illicit gold from Brazil and Guyana are Venezuelan military officials, and they're buying gold at a pretty substantial market price, so higher than international gold prices.

So they're basically creating an incentive system for illicit gold mining networks in Brazil and in Guyana, for ample massive criminal organizations, to go and sell their assets in Venezuela and not sell their illicit gold in Brazil and Guyana. And this triborder region of Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana is now becoming this major route, both for gold and increasingly for drugs as well. So for now, the regime mostly remains in place. By all accounts, the same Venezuelan military officials who had been at the forefront of these links are still in place. But we know that the situation is very volatile. And the Amazon is a tinderbox of many different criminal actors and these volatile protection pacts between Venezuelan state officials and criminal groups that are likely to suffer some transformations over the coming months. We might be seeing greater movement of people across the Venezuela–Brazil border and maybe an intensification of illicit gold flows and illicit drugs going through this region as well.

TR: Thanks, Gabriel. I would be remiss, if not, to go back to Clavel to see what she's seeing and feeling in the Amazon, too. I know you work very closely with the communities there.

CR: Until now, we haven't seen any major changes. As I said before, especially in the deep south, in the border with Brazil, the *colectivos* or the armed groups have told people to stay calm. And they have been used by state actors in the last few years to control the population, because this region is increasingly an opposition movement. If you see the results in the last elections in the south of Venezuela, municipalities that have been Chavistas for the last years were highly voting for Edmundo González. When I saw the numbers, I was impressed because I saw a real change in this region. And they have been operating since, I think 10 years ago, because all this started with the organization of gold *cooperativas* in the south. Chávez intended to organize mining around that idea. Then Delcy Rodríguez and Maduro switched the idea of how to manage that area. Also with the gold prices and the economic crisis, they looked to the south as a way to get fresh money with gold trafficking to stay

in power.

But this region has been fighting for many, many years. But right now, everything is staying calm. From the interviews that I had last year, human rights violations had become worse because many Indigenous communities had been displaced to Brazil or to some areas. Many of them had been killed. Venezuelans were displaced to Brazil, and they were living in the border in these humanitarian refugee camps. They were pressured because the health situation in the hospitals in the south of Venezuela is very, very difficult. So we have many factors now, like human rights, the economic crisis, the health situation that has displaced people, especially to Brazil, to get access to health in that border, and also the institutions, because I remember when all this violence started in the south of Venezuela, I was covering extractive industries. And then we started covering violence because the state moved specific actors to the south to control that territory and put in place people to do the job for them.

So this started because the government allowed it. The government pushed that to have social control of the population in the south, which had been increasingly in political opposition to the government in the last years.

TR: Thank you, Clavel. Eduardo reminded us a little bit about the migration situation. You've really emphasized the humanitarian, the disenfranchisement, the disengagement with the state. Rebecca, you've done a lot of work on youth and gangs and the kinds of vectors that play into the appeal of criminality. I'd really like your analysis of how you think all this might play out in reality for the youth and security and criminal gang situation, and how that's going to go with the US border closed and pressure across the region.

RH: It's important to know just from the start that we have no idea. Honestly, anything could happen in the next few months, and I think we can't repeat that enough. I've been hesitant since the invasion to make any claims about what's going to happen. I don't think it's surprising that we haven't yet seen any major conflicts or transformations in criminal markets in Venezuela because the Trump administration had a very poor understanding, and we don't know if this was something they bought into because they wanted to or because they actually believed it, but had a very poor understanding of the power structure within Chavismo. Let's just take Trump at face value and believe that he actually thought that Maduro ran Tren de Aragua and Cartel de los Soles. We know that that's not the case. In fact, Diosdado Cabello and [Vladimir] Padrino López are much more important actors when we're thinking about who controls larger illicit markets in the country. Maduro was definitely involved in that, but had nowhere near the same power. This is one of the reasons why Maduro spent years trying to consolidate his control on the military when he first came into office because he didn't have any. And so Maduro was not the key figure running. Even if something like the Cartel de los Soles did exist, he wouldn't have been the one running it.

This is one of the reasons why we haven't seen major changes. And because we haven't seen any major changes yet, I assume that this panorama of gangs and the use that they depend on to continue to operate isn't going to look very different quite yet. I would not be surprised, and it most likely will happen, I think, in the next few months, that we'll start to see more conflict between these gangs because it's also really important to note that the Venezuelan criminal landscape is largely defined by small actors, by disorganized small actors. We've been talking a lot about these large organizations, but the large majority of actors in the country that are engaged in criminal activities are much smaller groups. What we know from the scholarship is that when there's alteration or disruption in criminal markets, that tends to produce conflict between these smaller gangs. It's not apparent yet that what the United States wants out of Venezuela is going to necessarily affect yet the military's economic interests. It might, but that's just not clear. But I think it's very safe to say that in the coming months,

we will see much higher rates of violence between young men in Venezuela who are caught up in gangs. I think we will see that because of this destabilization of markets. This, to a certain degree, will create some power vacuums in certain places. That opens the opportunity for gangs to expand their control over markets and territory. I think they'll be engaging in that over the next few months. I would say the overall effect is going to be a very violent, unfortunately lethal and violent effect on youth gangs, and also probably between police forces that are competing with youth gangs to control that territory as well.

SGF: I really appreciate all our panellists acknowledging that we don't know what's going to happen because anything can happen at this point. But there are things we know about how organized crime works and has worked in the past. And that's why we want to look also at the region, because whatever happens in Venezuela is going to affect Brazil, Colombia and of course, the Caribbean region. And now I want to go to the Caribbean and ask you, Romain, what are we seeing there? People were talking about increased movements in the borders, more gang activity. Have we seen any effects in the Caribbean criminal dynamics after or before the extradition of Maduro?

Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, *Head of Haiti and Caribbean Observatory, GI-TOC:* The US strikes over the past six to seven months against go-fast boats, allegedly transporting cocaine from the Venezuelan coast towards the US, was the backbone narrative behind the intensification of militarization of the region, and of course, the Caribbean Sea in the past six–seven months. Our research in Colombia, Venezuela and the Caribbean in recent months has shown that these go-fast boats, as well as slower vessels such as boat carriers, fishing boats, are indeed used to smuggle cocaine from the Venezuelan coast, among other incoming destinations, to various other destinations in the Caribbean, starting with Trinidad and Tobago, for example, a few dozen kilometres away from Venezuela. And also as far as Haiti, the Dominican Republic and other destinations in the West Indies. And an important mention in that debate is the end destination of the immense majority of that cocaine being Europe and not the United States.

The strikes disrupted the networks in the Caribbean. We've heard of it, it's been documented in the press, we've been conducting interviews that confirmed it. There's been an impact on cocaine trafficking in the Caribbean after the strikes. And we can assume that those networks have surely reorganized themselves to move the cocaine in other ways. We can also imagine that trafficking will resume if, for example, the US strikes don't go on forever. But above all, I think it's necessary to carefully study the disruptions within the Venezuelan territory, with actors maybe eager to take greater control over cocaine trafficking or to launch or relaunch new routes, old routes in the Caribbean.

The second issue for the Caribbean is with no doubt the illicit trafficking of firearms from Venezuela, whether it is illicit trafficking of firearms in the hands of civilians, or military stocks. In recent years, several reports have shown evidence of firearms trafficking from Venezuela to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the islands neighbouring Venezuela, and even the French West Indies, where we conducted fieldwork in 2025. Given the crisis in the country at the moment in Venezuela, we have to think of the power of the arms trafficking networks that could be taking the opportunity of the disruption to start making more money, new money, out of trafficking illicit firearms.

Haiti could be, for example, an attractive destination for Venezuelan networks. Three years ago, a stockpile of weapons and ammunition was seized in Haiti, and it was proven that it was coming from Venezuela. Here again, the potential instability generated by Maduro's capture could push certain actors to engage in arms trafficking, including the diverging of military stocks. This is a huge concern for Caribbean countries, but also, of course, for other South American countries that we've been

mentioning here. I would say that Maduro's capture is the latest very disruptive factor in a region, the Caribbean Basin, already extremely fragile due to criminal networks and cocaine and firearms trafficking in recent years. And these dynamics will need to be monitored very, very closely now.

RH: I think it's probably clear for people who are familiar with the boats that were being described, but the shipments that are coming from Venezuela to the Caribbean – it's a very small amount. I just want to highlight that, particularly as someone from the United States, that has sold this narrative that this was about combating narco-trafficking. This is an incredibly small amount of drugs in the large scheme of things. It's absolutely true that people use these routes for drug trafficking, but it's such a minor amount, and I think that's important to note to contradict this narrative that the Trump administration has been selling for a long time.

CFM: Just to add that fentanyl and synthetic opioids are the ones largely responsible for overdose deaths in the US, not cocaine. And so also just to put that into perspective, there's no evidence to date that there is fentanyl production or trafficking from Venezuela to the US. Also, again, to nuance this conversation around drug trafficking and what is causing excess mortality in North America.

TR: Thanks, Cecilia. Romain, before we leave the Caribbean, there was a question in the very busy chat of the Q&A asking about this disruption of cocaine trafficking flows and the confidence of criminal groups to operate activities in the Caribbean Sea. How do you see that impacting organized crime in the Caribbean, the gangs there, and what they may end up doing as a result? I know that you work a lot in Haiti, and Haiti is another massive criminal vector for Latin America that's been high in the headlines recently. Do you see any fallout there?

RCG: Although the quantities might be small, what we used to see and what we used to hear in the Caribbean for cocaine traffickers is that any option is valid for cocaine. So you might get small quantities out of Venezuela today, larger quantities out of Colombia tomorrow morning, fishing boats again. The objective from all those small amounts of cocaine is also to find bigger ports in the Caribbean that can allow you to then containerize larger amounts of cocaine to send it to Europe. And those ports are located in the Dominican Republic and in the French West Indies in that case, also in Jamaica. So in terms of the restructuring of cocaine trafficking in the Caribbean after Maduro's capture, as we have seen in so many other places, the networks will adapt. The networks are, unfortunately, very resilient, and there's probably tons of other options if cocaine trafficking is disturbed right now from Venezuela. I don't think the traffickers in the Caribbean, unfortunately, will go out of business just because of Maduro's capture. What's going to be interesting, in the dozens of islands that surround Venezuela and make for stopping areas in the Caribbean trafficking of cocaine, is to see what we can document as an impact in the coming month and see what happens.

Firearms could be another really important issue because of the stockpiles that are located in Venezuela, and the fact that we've documented and read that firearms coming from Venezuela have been circulating in the region.

On those matters, Haiti is an interesting and probably an attractive location if you want to traffic cocaine and, especially, illicit firearms right now. There is demand for that. There is demand for large amounts of illicit firearms and ammunition in Haiti. If someone is able to organize new connections between Haiti and Venezuela on firearms trafficking, I'm sure we will end up finding that that ammunitions and firearms will end up in Haiti, which is a massive concern.

A more political impact of the Venezuelan crisis on the resolution of the Haitian crisis are the upcoming

discussions at the Security Council in New York on the Gang Suppression Force, the new upcoming UN multilateral force supposed to be deployed in 2026 in Haiti. At the Security Council, you have a number of Latin American and South American states that currently have very tense relationships with the Trump administration and that have shown interest in the past to support the deployment of a UN multilateral force in Haiti and to contribute to the resolution of the crisis. I think it's going to be interesting to monitor as well what happens at the Security Council within the relationship between those countries and the US and the Haitian crisis in the middle.

SGF: Cecilia, you mentioned fentanyl, and I couldn't wait to ask about Mexico, because this is another big relationship of the United States. The threat has come to Mexico as well. You were saying that the biggest threat actually to the United States is fentanyl, and that has been quite a diplomatic conversation going on. What has been the effect of these Venezuela events in Mexico thus far? Has that affected anything at all? Can you see any changes on the criminal dynamics? We know that there are Mexican gangs possibly also operating in Venezuela. What's your reading from Mexico?

CFM: It's important to take a step back and realize that Mexico has been in the 'naughty list' of the Trump administration for a long time. So even during the first Trump administration, Mexico was framed not necessarily as a cooperative partner, but rather like a problem south of the border and something that needed to be dealt with. In that context, what we have seen, especially the [Claudia] Sheinbaum administration, is really depart from what the [Andrés Manuel] López Obrador administration did. And so this is a silent break. She's not advertising that she has taken a different course, but the attitude of Mexico vis-à-vis fentanyl, for instance, has changed dramatically. President Sheinbaum has talked about how she doesn't want anyone dying from overdoses in any country, which is a very different discourse from López Obrador, who talked about how fentanyl was a US-only problem. And we have seen a lot of cooperation on security happen again. The day before the first strike in the Caribbean, Secretary [Marco] Rubio was in Mexico, and this high-level implementation group between Mexico and the US was announced to tackle shared challenges in which firearms trafficking was included. This is important because it tells you that Mexico is able to also place on that agenda issues that are important for the country and that there is an ongoing dialogue.

President Sheinbaum, unlike Colombia, has also opted for using diplomatic channels to guide the relationship rather than having a relationship on social media. There's no discussion, there's no spats that happen over social media at all. What we have seen is recently there was a call, Mexico condemned the attacks in Venezuela. What we have seen is a discourse emphasizing the productive relationship, the US ambassador to Mexico said that the relationship is in the best state it has been in many years. While I understand sometimes government press releases are not the most thrilling things to read, I do think it's important to understand how the US is characterizing that relationship with Mexico. So right now, Mexic, is managing and trying to avoid a strike in the country. And so it will be very important to watch what Mexico continues to do to offer what the US calls 'tangible results'. We have seen the so-called transfer of prisoners, so not quite extradition, because they did not use the extradition treaty to transfer these prisoners from Mexico to the US. And so it will be interesting to track what Mexico will continue to offer. But we have seen an emphasis on managing that relationship, on reactivating security cooperation. And so far, we have seen that both countries seem to be satisfied with how it has been managed until now. But of course, a concern for Mexico is to continue to manage how the US feels about what they call narco-terrorists in the country, which, again, Mexico does not recognize that designation.

SGF: Definitely something to watch because it is going to be evolving. Eduardo, I'm coming back to you. I have

a question from the audience that I'm going to give back to you because you have been looking at these conflicts in the border, and somebody from our audience wants to know about the weapons that are at the hands of the militias, the *colectivos*. How can this affect disputes between countries in the region? Should this massive amount of weapons going in the hands of different criminal actors be something concerning?

EBG: I just wanted to take a step back further just for a little. When you ask me about the situation at the border between Colombia and Venezuela, first of all, I would say that it's the largest Colombian border. And even if we can find along the border very similar challenges in terms of security at the transborder level, I do think that we can narrow, from my point of view, two strategic areas of concern in the Colombian border with Venezuela. First of all, I would say the Catatumbo region, which is located in Norte de Santander. It's important because the Catatumbo region is a hotspot for coca crops, and it has been so for many years. And a second area is the region of Arauca, more in the south, a historical stronghold of the ELN. The region of Arauca borders the province of the state of Apure in Venezuela. And it's a very large border, but with many differences.

And in terms of the audience question, what is interesting is that, as I mentioned before, it's not the first time that Colombian non-state armed actors are present in the border or have crossed the border. You could make a parallel between the government of Santos Calderón and the former FARC-EP while Hugo Chávez was in power, with the government of Gustavo Petro [2022–2026] and the ELN while Nicolás Maduro was in power. But the parallel stops there. Why? Because the former FARC-EP had a very vertical structure in terms of command and control, in contrast with the ELN, as the structure of the ELN is more loose. It's more like a federation. Right now, in the security landscape in Colombia, none of the non-state armed groups involved in President Gustavo Petro's Total Peace project have a strategic interest in terms of reaching out to power at the national level.

So what we have seen is that there are regional clusters, in the case of the ELN with the border of Venezuela, clearly. And what I want to say is that there is a strong criminalization. I don't want to fall into Paul Collier's argument, denying a nexus with the political realm. But also, and now to answer the question of the audience, what is interesting is that there is a very wide portfolio of criminal activities. So for instance, with two of my colleagues from the Universidad Externado de Colombia, Irene Cabrera and Andrés Macías, we were able to do research in the southern border of Colombia with Ecuador and Peru, and what we saw is that all these criminal markets are in a certain way intertwined. I mean, you don't have on one hand, cocaine going out, on the other hand, arms trafficking getting in. It's all supply and demand. In terms of a policy recommendation, which is easier to say than to do, is to bear in mind that these criminal markets are really interconnected, and that non-state armed actors may have, for instance, a participation in terms of drug trafficking, but also in terms of migrant trafficking.

And just to add a little bit to the previous discussion, regarding the extradition that was mentioned before, Colombia has a lot of evidence, for instance, when the leaders of paramilitary groups during the [Álvaro] Uribe government [2002–2006 and 2006–2010] were extradited to the United States, they were only charged in terms of drug trafficking. But what happens to all the human rights violations? And what will happen with Nicolás Maduro and the record, for instance, of human rights violations in terms of civil liberties being eroded? It's clearly a case of threat inflation in terms of what has been going on. And last but not least, we are witnessing first row how this new global order is taking place. How does this change our understanding of borders? The previous assumptions we held regarding borders, I do think that they need to be revisited.

TR: Thank you so much, Eduardo. I feel like we have so much expertise in the table and everybody actually has a lot to say, and we thought 90 minutes would be too long, and now we're running out of time. This is a very

rich topic. We will, out of this webinar and plus our research, be releasing a summary and a report, and we will try to answer some of the questions that have continued to build up in the chat since there are many, many good ones. I was just going to ask Felipe to give me an answer to this one question being asked about a union between Colombian armed groups to defend themselves from a threat from the US, which I think picks up on some of Eduardo's earlier comments and other discussions.

FB: Thank you, Tuesday. And I think this also relates to the question about the *colectivos*. I'm going to venture into a bit of futurism here, because it's impossible to say with certainty what's going to happen, but we can outline some scenarios. I'll start with the *colectivos* and then move to Colombia.

On the one hand, Venezuela has armed civilians who are ready to defend the political regime if the moment comes and if they are called upon by the military, the government, or by those who remain in the government. But at the same time, there are also armed actors who, in a power vacuum, could begin exploiting illicit economies at the local and urban levels, reflecting what Rebecca described as the disorderly logic of how criminal groups operate in Venezuela. I think the *colectivos* pose a dual threat: first, the possibility of sparking an internal armed conflict if a transition does not take place; and second, the potential to exploit criminal economies at the local level.

I believe something similar could happen on the other side of the border. If the balance between state-embedded actors and Venezuelan criminal groups collapses, then on the Colombian side of the border we would also see tension, shifts in structures and a reconfiguration of agreements, especially involving the ELN on the Catatumbo side and FARC dissident groups operating further into Colombian territory.

Regarding the question of a possible alliance, many of these groups have also been designated as narcoterrorist organizations by the US government, which creates the possibility of direct attacks against them. That could trigger defensive responses from these groups if any action were to take place on the Colombian side. The question is how feasible an operation in Colombia would even be at this moment. I have my doubts, but again, we're speculating.

To wrap up your question, Tuesday, I want to highlight the specific case of the ELN, because it is the actor that operates on both sides of the border. The ELN could take on a self-defence role alongside the *colectivos*, potentially fueling a long-term internal armed conflict, supported and financed by illicit economies. At the same time, the ELN might pursue a more aggressive strategy of reorganization and territorial expansion on the border, much as they already did in Catatumbo, where they attacked FARC dissidents and pushed south toward Arauca. And that, without a doubt, would lead to increased violence and a heightened humanitarian impact in Colombia.

TR: Clavel, you had your hand up before. Is there something following on from Felipe's point you wanted to add now?

CR: Yes, about the transition, the democratic transition that I think is very important in this discussion. All of this looks like a disaster in the south and in Venezuela, many groups, arms… and people maybe are wondering, how this is going to be re-institutionalized in Venezuela, if all these groups are operating there. And I think pushing for democratic elections is a very important step, of course, as many NGOs and leaders have been saying, because from my perspective in the south of Venezuela, all of this started because the government started the erosion of democracy, attacking the unions that control this industry. For example, in the gold mines, we have a state corporation that controls the area in the south of Venezuela. When we started seeing these violent groups, it was because the state

displaced this state corporation that had been operating since democracy started in Venezuela and divided it between different groups and the military, and they incorporated many another actors, displaced their own state. And also the elections in 2017, the first election that they stole was in Bolivar state in the south of Venezuela because they lost. And there was proof that they lost. The court has never resolved that situation, but it started there.

So I feel a little bit optimistic because with democratic elections, free and fair elections, results can happen in Venezuela because many things can be organized with that starting point, with elections. Because we have seen, and also in the world with Brazil, they just removed the authorities, the legal authorities that have been elected for another government to control the area. I want to see what will happen in Venezuela with free and fair elections, how the reinstitution of Venezuela can be developed in that order, how these armed groups are going to react to that because as I already said, they have been there because the government allowed them to stay there. That probably will have a reorganization, a different monopoly is going to start.

The unions in the south of Venezuela were a very powerful force, and the government just put many of them in jail, and some of them are in exile. They control the iron industry, gold mining. They control the workers. Thousands of workers that depend on the state corporation that right now are not producing anything, that is part of the humanitarian crisis. So I think that when that happens, we will see a re-institutionalization of the state in the south of Venezuela and in many places, because someone asked about what is happening with the oil industry. And if you see the result of the oil industry, the unions, for example, that were a force for accountability, to do some accountability to the oil industry, many of them are in jail. Leaders, they were Chavistas, are in jail, and people are fighting for them to be released. So we need different things to happen right now to see a quick recovery of not only democracy, but of the participation of many actors.

And I want to put the point of civil society organizations in Venezuela, because I think civil society in Venezuela is very well organized, and they have been able to document many violations of human rights. It's a very important actor. In many discussions, it's like 'Oh, Venezuela is Maria Corina and Delcy Rodriguez'. But we also have the universities, we have the NGOs, we have people working at many stages, documenting this situation and pushing for a democratic transition and a starting point is free elections in Venezuela. And with that starting point, I think we can have another conversation then when that happens, hopefully soon, how these actors are going to transform, how they are going to align to different actors now.

TR: Thank you, Clavel. You saved us on a number of topics there. There were questions around oil, and with the US control and changing production, how that might change the political economy. There are a number of questions that look at that. As we have five minutes left, I'm going to put a challenge to all of our participants, all of our panellists, just to basically tell me in a few words, with the spirit that all of us want to see a reduction in organized crime, all of us want to see a reduction in violence and a reinstitution of the rule of law in Venezuela and the region as a whole, for you, what is the one issue that you think we can't take our eye off? What do we absolutely have to pay attention to in the next weeks and months as the fallout of this extraction takes place? What must we pay attention to?

RCG: Again, just to put our attention onto the Caribbean, a region that has been extremely unstable over the past couple of years, largely under-researched and under-reported for some time. I think we need to monitor what are going to be the consequences of the crisis in Venezuela.

GF: I think the intersections between drugs, gold and now potentially oil as well. Going back to the question that you brought up, Tuesday, we see this in Brazil already where the PCC [Primeiro Comando da Capital] is heavily involved in fuel smuggling, and there's also precedent in the region of the ELN attacking oil pipelines as well in Colombia. There's every prospect of similar dynamics coming into play in Venezuela, particularly as we're seeing the larger criminal groups in the region now generating a lot of revenue from the illicit gold trade over the last two or three years. I think we're going to start to see the effect of that, their cash-heavy approach now, their ability to exert coercion in this strange power vacuum that's likely to emerge in Venezuela. I think that's a major threat.

If I can add just another quick one, we're seeing the Brazilian criminal groups, the PCC and the Comando Vermelho [CV], expanding aggressively throughout the Amazon, but they haven't expanded into Venezuela so far. So something that I'm particularly curious to watch out for is whether we're going to see the PCC or CV or both operating in Venezuela now as well.

FB: I will focus on what will be the consequence of this new equilibrium in Venezuela regime regarding the relationship with other criminal groups. So they had a fragile but functioning order that now is broken. So what will be this new alignment will tell us what will happen also with organized criminal groups, not only in Venezuela, but in the region, particularly for the case of Colombian and Brazilian groups.

CFM: As we see these actions unfold, we're going to start having very lethal conflicts that are continuing. I'm thinking, for instance, of Sinaloa and thinking about [Ismael] Zambada's extraction from Sinaloa that he calls a kidnap, and the fallout from that. Now we have very high levels of violence in the state, homicide, but other types of violence that have resulted precisely as the infighting continues. And so now with Venezuela, we might start to see very high levels of lethality in the region where you remove people from criminal structures in this manner instead of finding other paths to preclude this criminal activity.

EBG: I would say at the level of the border between Colombia and Venezuela, notwithstanding the disputes around key criminal hotspots, such as in the Catatumbo, I would think that this will reveal the extent of Nicolás Maduro's alleged control of all criminal activities. It's a natural experiment, and also will allow us to check at the local level, the level of autonomy and leverage of criminal actors with local authorities, civilian populations and so on.

CR: Freedom of expression, I would say. Because I know many actors before the extraction of Maduro were pushing a scenario like China. We have a more open economy, but with less freedom than we have now. So I think freedom of expression could be an indicator, especially in the regions where people don't have it right now, of how things are going and what is allowed to be reported and what is not allowed to be reported and what is the interest of the current government to highlight and what they are trying to hide and punishing people that don't talk about that.

SGF: *Gracias*, Clavel. And I like what you said about that it's important to remember that there's a strong civil society in Venezuela. And I like what you say that freedom of expression is something to watch out for. The quality of the information and what we know is going to be essential to understand this problem and to produce good responses. So thank you all for committing to that. It has been a wonderful experience getting to know more about the situation with you all. And thank you to all of you who stayed and watched the whole thing. It was such a pleasure.