



Presence, Activity and Influence of Organized Armed Groups in Mining Operations South of the Orinoco River

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ABRAE	Áreas Bajo Régimen de Administración Especial <i>Areas Under Special Administrative Control</i>
AM	Arco Minero del Orinoco <i>Orinoco Mining Arc</i>
BCV	Banco Central de Venezuela <i>Central Bank of Venezuela</i>
CICPC	Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas <i>Scientific, Penal and Criminal Investigations Corps</i>
CVG	Corporación Venezolana de Guayana <i>Venezuelan Corporation of Guayana</i>
CVM	Corporación Venezolana de Minería <i>Venezuelan Mining Corporation</i>
DGCIM	Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar <i>General Office of Military Counterintelligence</i>
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional <i>National Liberation Army (Colombian)</i>
FAES	Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales, unidad especial de la Policía Nacional Bolivariana <i>Special Actions Forces, a special unit of the Bolivarian National Police</i>
FANB	Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana <i>Bolivarian National Armed Force</i>
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia <i>Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia</i>
GNB	Guardia Nacional Bolivariana <i>Bolivarian National Guard</i>
GAO	Organized Armed Group
OVV	Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia <i>Venezuelan Violence Observatory</i>
PEB	Policía del Estado Bolívar <i>Bolívar State Police</i>
PNB	Policía Nacional Bolivariana <i>Bolivarian National Police</i>
REDI	Región Estratégica de Defensa Integral <i>Strategic Region for Integral Defense</i>
SEBIN	Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional <i>National Bolivarian Intelligence Service</i>
ZODI	Zona Operativa de Defensa Integral <i>Operational Zone for Integral Defense</i>

Executive summary

Mining in southern Venezuela, represented in the Orinoco Mining Arc, has become an activity imbued within a large organized criminal network that reaches all levels of political and military power. One of the key irregular actors within this complex plot consists of the Organized Armed Groups (OAGs). This report presents the results of an investigation into the presence, activity and influence of the OAGs in mining operations south of the Orinoco River, covering the states of Amazonas and Bolívar as the scope of study.

The territory south of the Orinoco reports a huge increase in violence, associated with clashes between criminal gangs, Colombian guerrilla groups, state security forces and the Bolivarian National Armed Force (FANB), all in conflict for control of the mining areas. There have been numerous massacres, extrajudicial executions and disappearances, among other violent acts. The state of Bolívar appears among the top places for violence at the national level. Three of the most violent municipal districts in the country are located in the mining areas of the state of Bolívar and have exceptionally high rates of violent deaths: El Callao municipal district with a rate of 511, Sifontes municipal district with 189 and Roscio municipal district with 125 per hundred thousand inhabitants.

The report is organized into three sections. The first chapter deals with the general context of the presence, activity and influence of the OAGs in mining operations south of the Orinoco. The second chapter presents an analysis of the scope and geographical distribution, trajectory and interaction between the OAGs as part of the mining phenomenon. The third section consists of a set of fact sheets that systematize basic information on the presence and activity of each of the OAGs considered in this investigation.

As a result of the study, a total of 13 OAGs were identified, of which 3 are present in the state of Amazonas and 12 in the state of Bolívar. The municipal districts with the greatest presence of OAGs are Sifontes with 9, El Callao with 5, Roscio with 4 and Angostura with 3, all in the state of Bolívar. The distribution of the largest number of OAGs in these municipal districts appear to be associated with a higher level of conflict and violence. The OAGs with the greatest geographical distribution are the FARC dissidents and the ELN, both of which are the only ones present in both states. Eight OAGs maintain alliances with the national government, the state governments, the FANB and the state security forces, while 5 OAGs are antagonistic toward the government forces.

Introduction

Since 2018, SOSOrinoco has been shedding light on the environmental and social impacts that mining is causing in Venezuela's Guayana-Amazon Region, particularly in national parks and other protected areas, as well as in the Orinoco Mining Arc. SOSOrinoco's commitment has been to document and conduct an in-depth diagnosis of the region south of the Orinoco River and to raise awareness of the tragedy that is occurring, as well as to outline the urgent measures that must be taken to fend off this disaster.

Mining in southern Venezuela, as represented in the Mining Arc, has become an activity imbued within a large organized criminal network that reaches all levels of political and military power. Among the key actors within this complex plot are the Organized Armed Groups (OAGs). This report presents the results of an investigation into the presence, activity and influence of the OAGs in mining operations south of the Orinoco River.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Search for, compile and analyze information on the presence and activities of organized armed groups in the states of Amazonas and Bolivar, in the mining area.
- Analyze the presence, activity and influence of organized armed groups in mining activity south of the Orinoco River.
- Determine the geographic scope of the activity of these groups, the spaces under their influence, and the possible interactions among them in terms of the mining phenomenon south of the Orinoco.

For purposes of this research, we have adopted the category of Organized Armed Groups (OAGs) in a broad manner. Within the OAGs we include all non-state armed groups, such as organized criminal gangs, known as "los sindicatos" (the syndicates) or "el pranato" (groups ruled by current or former prison gang leaders), the so-called mega-bands, and Colombian guerrilla groups, among others. Basically, these actors are the operators in charge of the territorial control of the mines, those that supervise and control the miners. We have not included in the study the self-defense groups, better known as Indigenous Territorial Guards, which have multiplied in the southern part of the country, precisely as a means of defense by the indigenous communities against the onslaught of the OAGs. While there are significant differences among the various OAGs considered in this study, we have not addressed the issue of classification as part of the objectives.

This report is organized into three sections. The first chapter provides a general background on the presence, activity and influence of the OAGs on mining activity south of the Orinoco. The second chapter presents an analysis of the scope and geographic distribution, trajectory and interaction between the OAGs as part of the mining phenomenon. The third section consists of a set of data sheets that systematize basic information on the presence and activity of each of the OAGs considered in this research.



CHAPTER 1

Presence, activity and influence of the OAGs on mining activity south of the Orinoco river

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Presence, activity and influence of the OAGs on mining activity south of the Orinoco river

Violence in the south of Venezuela

Venezuela's Guayana region consists of the three states south of the Orinoco: Amazonas, Bolivar and Delta Amacuro. This region is experiencing an enormous increase in violence, mainly associated with the presence of organized crime and non-state armed actors with the consent of the government of Nicolás Maduro, mainly related to illegal mining, drug trafficking and illicit businesses associated with the mining economy. This region covers half of the national territory (equivalent to the size of Sweden), but is inhabited by only 7% of the population. Most of it is part of the Guiana Shield, one of the oldest geological formations on the planet, and has important deposits of mineral resources.

The state of Bolivar ranks among the highest in terms of violence in the country, although there appears to be a downward trend in the figures, similar to that reported at the national level. According to the monitoring and estimates of the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV), reports for 2017 indicated a rate of 113 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants for the state of Bolívar¹, making it the fourth most violent federal entity in the country. In 2018 it moved up to having the third highest rate nationally (107), to second place in 2019 (84), 2020 (62), and in 2021, it returned to the third highest rate (56.8).

Of the five most violent municipal districts in the country, three are located in the mining area of the state of Bolivar and have exceptionally high rates of violent deaths: El Callao municipal district with a rate of 511, Sifontes municipal district with 189 and Roscio municipal district with 125 per hundred thousand inhabitants. These municipal districts are precisely those with the most mining activity.

Amazonas was the third most violent state in the country in 2017, with a rate of 146, higher than Bolivar that year (113). However, in the following years it has been decreasing, and in 2020 it showed the lowest homicide rate in the country (17). The state of Delta Amacuro was the fourth most violent state in the country in 2021, with a rate of 52.1 (OVV, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

Illegal mining and the Orinoco mining arc

The region south of the Orinoco is home to an extraordinary wealth of mineral resources such as iron, bauxite, gold, diamonds, coltan and many others. Informal mining and illegal extraction, especially of gold and diamonds, has been a long-standing problem in the region. In 1999, a new Mining Law was passed, which included several articles dedicated to small-scale mining, mining associations and artisanal mining, which were included as activities addressed by this legislation. This legal framework, and the international gold prices that soared in the following years, encouraged the formalization of small-scale mining plots (SOSOrinoco, 2020f). However, the lack of controls by the Ministry of Mines and the Ministry of Environment, both of which became

¹ The rate of homicides, violent deaths or assassinations is expressed on the basis of 100,000 inhabitants. Hereafter, in order to facilitate the reading, only the numbers pertaining will be shown, thus omitting the reference "per 100,000 inhabitants."

increasingly ineffective and inefficient, led to a significant increase in “small-scale mining,” occupying protected areas and operating on the fringes of the law (SOSOrinoco, 2020g).

Starting in 2005, the government tried to fend off the advance of “small-scale mining,” remove such from strategic areas, control the illegal flow of gold and diamonds abroad and reverse the resulting environmental damage caused, especially along the Caura, Paragua and Caroní rivers in the state of Bolívar. First, the government applied the political strategy of the so-called “Mission Piar,” based on economic aid and technical support for the miners. In 2006, the “Mining Reconversion” policy was meant to have the miners abandon their activity and dedicate themselves to tourism, agriculture and other trades. Both failed for various reasons, but corruption in the management of resources was one of the main reasons. In 2010, the “Plan Caura” was implemented, which sought to evict illegal mining through military operations with the participation of the FANB and several ministries (SOSOrinoco, 2020g). None of the plans achieved the expected objectives, due to the lack of continuity, corruption in the agencies involved and the abuses and human rights violations perpetrated by the military forces.

In 2011, there was a new turn in national mining policy that accentuated the socio-environmental problems in gold mining areas and created conditions for increased insecurity. The enactment of the decree “with the rank, value and force of Organic Law that reserves to the State the activities of exploration and extraction of gold, as well as related and auxiliary activities,”² reserved for the State all activities related to gold mining, terminating all concessions, which became the property of the Republic. From then on, the State is the owner of the sector, through its public institutes or state-owned companies or subsidiaries and through joint ventures where the State has 55% or more of the control and participation. In particular, this norm affected small-scale miners, since it terminated the extraction authorizations, forcing them to associate with the State, which they did not accept (SOSOrinoco, 2020f).

The result of this policy was a substantial increase in illegal mining and large mining companies abandoning their activities in the country, preferring to transfer their investments to other countries due to the legal insecurity. This withdrawal did not imply that the mining workers had left the extraction areas; on the contrary, they continued to mine there, but in a context of anarchy and legal precariousness that in the following years was added to the personal insecurity, given the loss of institutional control channels. The isolated geographic environment, predominant in Bolívar, along with the conditions of institutional anarchy, was taken advantage of by the criminal world, in a context of high gold prices that attracted people from all regions of the country and even from neighboring countries to the gold mining areas (Idem).

With the gradual worsening of the economic crisis and the humanitarian emergency, together with the increase in the price of gold and other minerals, the mining population increased, incorporating more and more of the region’s inhabitants, including the indigenous population, as well as tens of thousands of impoverished people from all over the country who have entered the mines in search of survival for themselves and their families. There is no official information on the number of people currently engaged in mining. This population flow generated an exponential increase in the areas being subjected to illegal mining, the associated social and environmental problems, as well as crime and violence.

² Decree N° 8.413 del 23.08.11, published in Gaceta Oficial N° 37.759 of 16 September 2011.

The collapse of the oil-based economy and the dismantling of basic industries in the Guayana region forced the Nicolás Maduro government to accelerate the extraction of the vast mineral resources found south of the Orinoco, as a readily available source of economic resources. With this objective in mind, the concept of the “Orinoco Mining Arc”³ (hereinafter MA) was decreed in 2016, paving the way for mining gold, diamonds, coltan and other minerals, over an extension of almost 112,000 km² in the state of Bolívar.

The MA was decreed without the approval of the National Assembly, and subsequently declared illegal and unconstitutional. This project also did not conduct environmental and socio-cultural impact studies, nor consultation processes with the indigenous peoples, as established by Venezuelan law. Although the intention of the MA was to attract capital investments to develop the industrial mining sector, the unreliable conditions, given the lack of transparency and legality, resulted in very few investment agreements. As the government’s expectations were not met, the MA became a free-for-all policy that boosted informal mining in the southern part of the country without any type of control or environmental or fiscal regulation, and without any delimitations according to the geographic area defined as being within the MA, and thus extended throughout the country’s south, affecting protected areas such as National Parks and other ABRAEs, as well as indigenous territories (SOSOrinoco, 2021).

By creating the MA, Maduro’s regime gave carte blanche to large-scale mining activity without the State or Venezuelan society being prepared to wield appropriate control over the environmental and social consequences this would entail. From the very moment of the public announcement of this plan promoting extractive operations, significant migrations to the mining areas of the states of Bolívar and Amazonas began, with people coming in from all over the nation’s territory. Many of these people became gold and diamond miners for the first time, joining the pre-existing small-scale mining, and seeking relief from the poverty imposed by the national economic crisis. Since then, environmental and social damages in the area have intensified, as have insecurity, murders and conflicts with local communities, in the context of a struggle for control of the mining territory. As part of this conflict, armed irregular groups, state security agencies and mining communities have intervened (SOSOrinoco 2020f).

Irregular armed groups and criminal Economies

Mining areas are mainly under the control of, or disputed by, organized armed groups, including the so-called “mining syndicates,” criminal gangs or “pranatos”, mega-gangs and guerrilla groups of Colombian origin such as the ELN and the FARC dissidents, among others. The mining “syndicates” originated in construction labor unions in the state of Bolívar State that were involved in extortion practices, and which moved their operations over to mining activity as a result of the economic crisis and the collapse of the Guayana region’s basic industries. The “*pranato*”⁴ is a form of criminal organization in Venezuela, originating in the prisons, where a boss or “pran” imposes internal order and controls illicit activities through a hierarchical power structure. One of the common characteristics of all OAGs is their high firepower, with weapons and ammunition that normally exceed the capacities of the State’s own security forces.

³ Decree N° 2.248 published in Gaceta Oficial N°40.855 of 24 February 2016.

⁴ “Pranato,” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation), accessed March 11, 2022, [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pranato#:~:text=Un%20pran%20\(acr%C3%B3nimo%20de%3A%20preso,en%20espera%20de%20un%20juicio.](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pranato#:~:text=Un%20pran%20(acr%C3%B3nimo%20de%3A%20preso,en%20espera%20de%20un%20juicio.)

Several of these groups act with the acquiescence and support of the regime's top hierarchs and its military leadership, through a system that guarantees that a high proportion of the minerals extracted reaches their hands. In exchange, the OAGs receive a good portion of the profits that constitute one of the main sources of financing for these criminal groups (SOSOrinoco, 2021). It is estimated that between 70% and 90% of the gold leaves the country illegally, in operations involving high-level government officials and relatives close to the presidential entourage (Transparencia Venezuela, 2019). Other OAGs, on the other hand, do not have the support of the government and are pursued by the state's security forces, as well as by other OAGs aligned with the regime. An example of the latter has been the ELN, which has fulfilled offensive vanguard functions in operations against enemy gangs, in order to take control of mining areas.

The OAGs act as operators in charge of territorial control and the imposition of order in the mines, and are the ones who regulate access, supervise and control all persons entering or leaving the mines. To ensure safety, they establish a series of strict rules, as well as harsh and macabre punishments in case of non-compliance, including beatings, shooting in the hands, amputations and death. It is common for these punishments to be carried out publicly, for exemplary purposes, and they are often spectacular. For example, there is mention of executions of victims who are dismembered with chainsaws, axes or machetes. In other cases, the transgressors simply "disappear," or their bodies are found atrociously mutilated or dismembered (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The OAGs derive economic benefits from all activity within the mining areas. One of their main sources of income is the practice of extortion in exchange for protection, known as the "vaccine" payment. The "vaccine" is usually paid in gold, which has become the currency of regular use for all types of economic transactions in the mining areas. This extortion is applied to miners and other workers at the mines, but also to all other people entering the mines, such as traders, transporters, sex workers, etc. In addition, the OAGs charge these fees to commercial establishments and service providers in the region's cities and towns that are in areas under their control.

The OAGs also engage in other illicit business some linked, and some not, to the mining economy, such as drug trafficking, trafficking of minerals and mercury, smuggling of arms, fuel, and food, timber extraction, and human trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation, etc. These illicit economies operate through a wide network of criminal partners that include cartels in Colombia, Central America, Mexico, Brazil and alliances with international partners for the commercialization of gold and other minerals, located in Colombia, Brazil, Guyana, Iran, Turkey, Russia, and Syria, among others.

The criminal and guerilla groups' control over vast areas in the southern part of the country, with the approval of Nicolás Maduro's regime, and in complicity with the FANB, constitutes, ipso facto, a cession of sovereignty over extensive areas where these criminal groups become the "rulers," with control of the territory, including a monopoly over weapons distributions and the administration of resources. In some of these areas, the criminal groups even use part of the profits to finance the operation of schools, medical centers and other services. These "fiefdoms" have become safe havens for criminal and guerrilla groups that multiply their profits from the illicit economies and strengthen themselves by recruiting new members from among the youth of the area. In addition to the serious damage this situation causes to Venezuela, it is also a serious threat to the security of neighboring countries and the entire region.

Massacres, extrajudicial executions and disappearances

The proliferation of armed groups has generated violent clashes between criminal gangs, Colombian guerrilla groups, state security forces and the FANB, in conflicts for control of the mining areas. Some of these conflicts have resulted in bloody episodes, such as the Tumeremo massacre that occurred in March of 2016, in which it is presumed that 28 miners were executed; 17 bodies were found in a mass grave shot in the head and dismembered with chainsaws, but the rest remain missing (Cofavic, 2016).

The violence generated by criminal groups is compounded by the lethal actions of the security forces and the FANB. The State's response to the criminal boom has been reduced to extermination, through the excessive use of force or extrajudicial executions, whereby the rate of lethal occurrences has surpassed that for homicides of any other type. As a salient example, in Roscio municipal district, police and military operations killed five times more people than did the criminals (OVV, 2017).

In September of 2019, inhabitants of Tumeremo (Sifontes municipal district) accused Army Commander Ernesto Solís Mares of being responsible for the disappearances and extrajudicial executions of more than 400 miners during the previous 3 years, as well as for facilitating the presence of armed groups. Between 2012 and 2020, at least 38 massacres occurred in mining areas. In 25 of these, which occurred between 2016 and 2020, 217 people were killed, mostly by state security forces, but also by the "syndicates," the ELN and the FARC (Cerlas et al., 2020).

Massacres became consolidated as a practice for subjugating the population starting in 2017, and then extrajudicial executions and selective killings were added. In most cases extrajudicial executions are reported as confrontations or resistance to authority (Cerlas and collaborators, 2020). The Army has been the body involved in more events of this type, but since mid-2019 the CICPC has become the security body with the most extrajudicial executions, followed by the FAES⁵ and other official security bodies (Cidehciu, 2020a). Between 2019 and 2020, 426 people were executed by law enforcement officials in the state of Bolívar (Codehciu, 2021). Extrajudicial executions have resulted in more victims than massacres. Selective assassinations have multiplied, especially against people who report abuses and rights violations, generating a climate of terror and fear of reporting. The violence and the fear of being a victim of violence have led to the displacement of the population to other areas and neighboring countries.

Seventy seven reports of missing persons have been documented in mining areas of the state of Bolívar between 2012 and August 2020 (Codehciu, 2020b), most of which are in Sifontes municipal district (Clisánchez and Rangel, 2020). Relatives of victims of forced disappearance report have not received support from the State security forces, and instead have been ordered to give up the search. Impunity has encouraged them to investigate on their own, thus exposing themselves to threats from criminal groups (Rangel, 2019).

⁵ "Fuerzas De Acciones Especiales," Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, March 10, 2022), https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuerzas_de_Acciones_Especiales.

Emergence of the OAGs in the state of Bolivar

According to the investigations carried out on the subject, the violence that characterizes the gold and diamond mining areas of the state of Bolivar, acted out by the OAGs, has one of its main origins in the administration of General Francisco Rangel Gómez, during his second term as state governor, from 2008 to 2012. At that time, the conditions were in place in matters pertaining to mining and security policies, which were taken advantage of by a plot in which military officials with high-ranking police positions converged, together with common criminals, for the purpose of directly appropriating gold and other high-value minerals.

In those years, the first steps were taken by the Hugo Chávez government to seek greater State control over gold production. To achieve this, the expropriation of international mining operations was imposed, and producers were required to sell most of the gold to the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV). Since September of 2011, with the enactment of the “Gold Nationalization Decree or Law”⁶ (later modified), they were required to sell to the BCV the totality of the extracted mineral.

During this period, joint ventures in the mining industry, established between the State and transnational companies, as in the case of Minera Vensus C.A., began to show their presence. However, most of the foreign mining capital left the country during those years. Meanwhile, the state-owned mining company Minerven went through a critical financial and productive situation that led to its demise. As a result, industrial mining was replaced by small-scale extractive activities, with no environmental or mining institutional regulation. This situation was taken advantage of by criminal gangs that decided to take control, as is the case in mining areas in other countries such as Colombia.

According to documents released by former military-police officials who were in key positions, the direct participation of the governor at the time was fundamental. According to testimonies of two former security forces agents, there was a clandestine network consisting of armed gangs from Governor Rangel’s close circle and criminal groups that were distributed throughout Bolivar’s mining areas (Insight Crime, 2021b). The interest of both the gangs and Rangel was to take control of the gold. *“In the state of Bolívar,” says one of the sources, “it is almost impossible to apprehend a member of an organized crime group who is not connected to Julio César Fuentes Manzulli [then head of the Bolivar state police], the strong arm of Governor Rangel”* (idem).

According to journalistic sources reporting on the case, since 2009 the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) arrested several officials linked to Governor Rangel and the former Secretary of Bolívar’s Citizen Security, General Julio César Fuentes Manzulli, for alleged acts of corruption. Commissioner José Gregorio Lezama Gómez, who was head of the Anti-Extortion and Kidnapping Command of the State of Bolívar and who in January 2016 prepared a report delivered to the SEBIN’s general director, Gustavo González López, accused Rangel Gómez and Fuentes Manzulli of empowering the armed gangs and of pressuring the courts and the prosecutor’s office to release those apprehended for these irregular acts. In the report delivered to SEBIN director Lezama Gómez he directly accuses Fuentes Manzulli of having links to organized crime. He reports that in mid 2009, in Cambalache, state of Bolivar, an 80-foot boat and three tanker trucks loaded with diesel, helicopter fuel and gasoline were seized, presumably before they were smuggled out of the country by river. He stated that 2010 was when there were more links between Fuentes Manzulli and organized crime (Cuentas Claras Digital, 2017).

⁶ Decree N° 8.413 del 23 August 2011, Gaceta Oficial N° 39.759 of 16 September 2011.

“... beginning with the following events, a process of dismantling the Bolivar State Police begins, the policemen who act against irregularities or illicit acts are handed over, that is to say, their names and addresses are revealed by none other than police headquarters for the purpose of having them murdered in unrestrained shootings. Police officers do not have enough cartridges, but there is a group inside the regional government that is arming these criminals and surrendering to them areas of responsibility in low-income areas (El Capitán, in Vista al Sol; El Gordo Bayón, in the labor syndicate sector, El Ciego in Ciudad Bolívar and the mines of La Paragua, El Topo in the mines of Guasipati and Tumeremo, El Negro Juancho in the southern mines starting at El Dorado and ending at Las Claritas, El Sapito (Little Toad), right-hand man and coordinator of the mayor of Ciudad Bolívar, Sergio Hernández, very close to the governor, among other so-called ‘pranes’),” thus describes the report (Lezama, 2016).

This information coincides with research conducted by the daily *Correo del Caroní*, with military and police sources confirming the partition of the state of Bolivar among the principal leaders of the criminal world. According to a report published by the aforementioned news medium on 13 March 2017, El Callao was controlled by the pranes nicknamed Toto, Marco Polo and El Ruqui, meanwhile the El Perú sector was under the control of Anderson Pereira until 24 February 2017, when he was killed by a rival gang when leaving a discotheque in Puerto Ordaz; alias El Morocho (‘The Twin’) controlled the Nacupay sector. In Guasipati and San Felix, the leader was Phanol Vladimir Clemente Ojeda, alias Capitán (‘Captain’). Allegedly a man nicknamed El Morocholo (‘Half-Breed Moor’) was also in El Callao. In Tumeremo, after the death of Jamilton Andres Ulloa Suárez, alias El Topo (‘The Mole’), control was maintained by alias El Gordo (‘Fat Man’), from La Caratica neighborhood, and Armandito. In Las Claritas the pran (prison gang leader) is Wilson Rodríguez Aponte, nicknamed El Negro Juancho (‘Black Man Juancho’), and in El Dorado, Fabio Enrique González Isaza, alias El Negro Fabio (‘Black Man Fabio’) (Cuentas Claras Digital, 2017).

Lezama Gomez’s report also indicates the arrest of alias Juancho, on 28 June 2012, along with four other individuals, from whom firearms and four vehicles were seized. They were placed in the custody of the Office of the Fourth Prosecutor, but Governor Rangel Gómez pressured the courts and the prosecutor’s office for their release, and they were released the following day. The last case cited in the report is from 24 October 2015, which marked the arrest, in Upata, Piar municipal district, of Army Lieutenant Jesús Leonardo Curvelo, who was identified as Fuentes Manzulli’s driver, and taxi cab driver Pedro Goitia Salazar, while having in their possession 33 million bolivars that were meant to be used for the illegal purchase of gold in the southern region of the state of Bolívar and then taken to Colombia (Lezama, 2016). Fuentes Manzulli was also accused by Lieutenant Curvelo, who served as his personal assistant for 14 years. In the end, José Gregorio Lezama, the former chief commissioner of the SEBIN and author of the report, was arrested for having become an obstruction for the administration of the then-governor, General Rangel Gómez.

Subsequently, when General Justo Noguera became Governor of the State of Bolívar, in 2017, he changed his policy when he saw the uncontrolled power wielded by the criminal groups and the large gold fortunes they had in their hands. Starting in mid-2018, “Operation Metal Hands” was implemented together with the armed forces and other state security forces, as a new offensive against the criminal gangs and gold traffickers that were not aligned with the government. However, from then on, the guerrilla forces belonging to Colombia’s National Liberation Army (ELN) entered the scene, acting with the endorsement of, and in complicity with, the State and the Bolivarian (Venezuelan) National Armed Forces. Thus, the war between criminal gangs seeking to control the entire gold resource produced by small-scale mining, i.e. all Venezuelan gold, brought in a new actor, the ELN, which is believed to be working in alliance with the Maduro government to wrest power away from the other OAGs and ensure that the gold flows to the upper echelons of Venezuelan power.



CHAPTER 2

Geographic scope and interaction among the OAGs as part of the mining phenomenon south of the Orinoco river

CHAPTER 2

Geographic scope and interaction among the OAGs as part of the mining phenomenon south of the Orinoco river

Methodology

In order to identify the OAGs present in the study area and gather data on their presence, activity, trajectory and geographic scope, a systematic review was conducted on the internet. The search covered the period between 2015 and 2021 and the keywords were: armed groups, organized armed groups, irregular groups, syndicates, guerrilla, amazon, bolivar, violence, criminal gangs, organized violence, disappearances, mining control, dismemberments, murders, confrontations, massacres, persecution, mining, gold mining, pranes, illegal mining, mining power, FARC, ELN, FANB, FARC dissidents.

Two filters were used to select the information that formed part of the results. The first was limited to the review of only those links in which at least one of the keywords appeared in the title accompanied by a geographic location south of the Orinoco. The second was for the decision as to whether or not to take the result into account, for which it was necessary to identify an image, locality, or statement that evidenced what was stated.

A systematic search was carried out on the Internet with 32 combinations of keywords, which yielded a total of 1,807,589 results. Of the total number of results obtained, 3,320 were reviewed and 178 passed the two selection filters. The 178 publications obtained were reviewed. The relevant information was organized in a database designed for this purpose, and consisted of 17 elements: ID, name of the OAG, victim, state, parish, municipality, locality, date of the event, validity of the group in the territory, type of event, number of violent events, alliances, enemies, economic activity, name of the leader, nearby or related mine, source.

Based on the database obtained, the information was synthesized through the compilation of data sheets for each of the identified OAGs, which can be seen in detail in Chapter 3. This synthesis was the basis for the analysis of the presence, activity and influence of organized armed groups in the mining activity south of the Orinoco River, which is presented below.

In addition, we georeferenced the data on the location of the area of gang activity based on the information tabulated in the bibliographic review by state, municipal district, parish and locality. The georeferenced data served as the basis for the spatial analysis and the preparation of maps of distribution by municipal districts and location according to locality of the OAGs.

Geographic distribution, interaction and trajectory of the OAGs

As a result of the systematic search for information and a synthesis of the results, a total of 13 OAGs were identified in the states of Amazonas and Bolívar, as follows (in alphabetical order):

- Banda de El Chingo - Snub-Nosed's Gang
- Banda de El Ciego - The Blind Man's Gang
- Banda de El Topo' - The Mole's Gang
- Banda de El Negro Fabio - Black Man Fabio's Gang
- Banda de El Negro Juancho - Black Man Juancho's Gang
- Banda de El Toto y Zacarías - El Toto and Zacarías's Gang
- Banda de El Gordo Lisandro y El Coporo - Fat Man Lisandro and El Coporo's Gang
(The coporo is an Orinoco River fish: *Prochilodus mariae*)
- Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) - National Liberation Army (ELN)
- FARC Disidencias - FARC Dissidents
- Garimpeiros - Garimpeiros (Brazilian independent small-scale miners)
- Hermanos Rodríguez Cueva - Rodríguez Cueva Brothers
- Organización R - Organization R
- El Tren de Guayana - The Guayana Retinue

This list of OAGs may not reflect all of those that actually exist, but they're the ones that the systematic search yielded. There are other groups and criminal bosses that were identified in the search for information, but for which no further data was obtained, so it was decided not to include them in the summary of results. Among the OAGs or pranes that were not included are: Angelo and "Ruqui's" Gang in El Callao, alias "Marco Polo," a man nicknamed "Morocholo" and Anderson Pereira, also in El Callao, alias "Armandito" in Tumeremo, El Sapito - (Little Toad) (right-hand man and coordinator of the mayor of Ciudad Bolívar, Sergio Hernandez, very close to Governor Francisco Rangel Gomez), alias "Fausto" in El Dorado, the "Husli Organization" in Guasipati, among others. There are also some OAGs of which there are reports in the media, but which are usually defined simply as "syndicates" or "gangs", without further associated information to identify them.

Table 1 summarizes the confirmed information on the location of the OAGs by state and municipal district, and the geographic distribution can be seen in Map 1.

The presence of 3 OAGs was confirmed in the state of Amazonas and 12 in the state of Bolívar. The municipal districts with the highest presence of OAGs are Sifontes with 9, El Callao with 5, Roscio with 4 and Angostura with 3, all in the state of Bolívar. The distribution of the highest number of OAGs in these municipal districts appears to be associated with a higher level of conflict and violence for control of the mining areas. The three municipal districts in the state of Bolívar with the highest number of OAGs (Sifontes, El Callao and Roscio) are the areas with greatest mining activity, and are also the three municipal districts with the highest rates of violent deaths in the country, as indicated above. Only in one municipal district in the state of Bolívar, namely Padre Pedro Chien municipal district, was there no OAG presence identified according to sources consulted.

Name of the OAG	State of Amazonas	Upper Orinoco	Atabapo	Atures	Autana	Manapiare	Maroa	Río Negro	State of Bolívar	Angostura	Caroní	Cedeño	El Callao	Gran Sabana	Heres	Padre Pedro Chien	Piar	Roscio	Sifontes	Sucre	Total States	Total Mun. Districts
El Chingo's Gang									X				X						X		1	2
El Ciego's Gang									X	X				X	X		X				1	4
El Topo's Gang									X									X	X		1	2
El Negro Fabio's Gang									X										X		1	1
El Negro Juancho's Gang									X										X		1	1
El Toto and Zacarías's Gang									X				X								1	1
Gordo Lisandro and El Coporo's Gangs									X										X		1	1
National Liberation Army (ELN)	X		X	X	X				X	X		X	X				X	X	X	X	2	10
FARC Dissidents	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X							X	X	2	11
Garimpeiros	X	X				X		X													1	3
Rodríguez Cueva Brothers									X									X			1	1
Organization R									X				X						X		1	2
Guayana Retinue									X		X		X					X	X		1	4
	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	12	3	1	2	5	1	1	-	2	4	9	2		

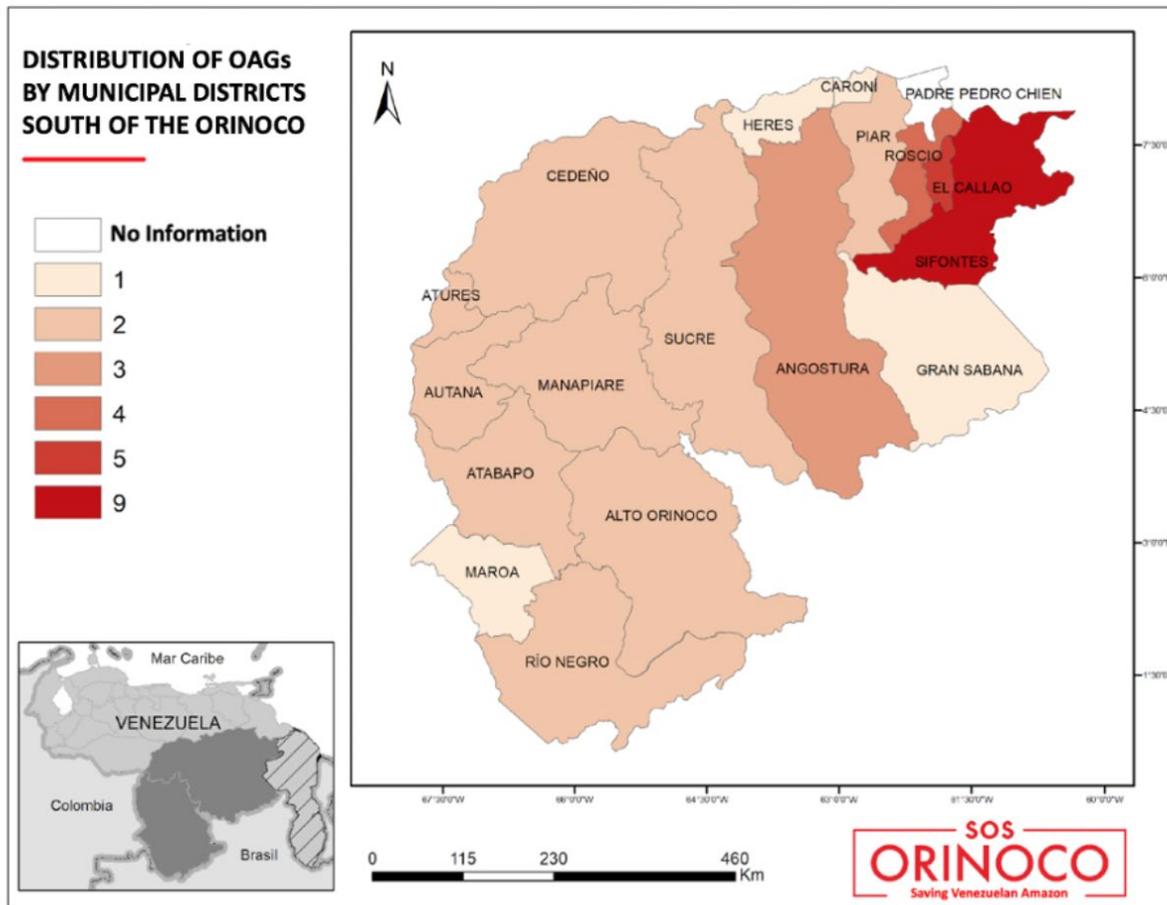
Table 1. Location of the OAGs by State and Municipal District.

Source: SOSOrinoco.

The OAGs with the greatest geographic distribution are the FARC Dissidents, which are present in the 7 municipal districts of the state of Amazonas and in 4 municipal districts in Bolívar; and the ELN, which is present in at least 3 municipal districts in Amazonas and 7 municipal districts in Bolívar. Furthermore, these are the only OAGs with a presence in both states.

In the state of Amazonas (Map 2) the presence of the two major Colombian guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN dissidents) and Brazilian garimpeiros was identified. The presence of garimpeiros is limited to the border strip with Brazil in the state of Amazonas, as these OAGs come from and maintain links with the neighboring country. So far, no conflicts between garimpeiros and guerrilla groups have been reported, and on the contrary, links of cooperation and association are suspected (SOSOrinoco, 2020d). The two guerrilla groups, which act in a FARC-ELN consortium of sorts, have territorial control over almost the entire territory of the state of Amazonas (except for the headwaters of the Orinoco) and in the Cedeño and Sucre municipal districts of the state of Bolívar. Sucre municipal district in the state of Bolívar covers the entire Caura River basin, where numerous violent incidents associated with struggles for control over mines were reported, and were led by criminal mining syndicates that could not be identified and therefore were not included in the database.

However, the advance of the guerrilla groups into the Caura River basin displaced the criminal gangs in that area. Thus, there is a border of sorts delimited by the Caura River basin, which marks the western limit of action of the gangs and criminal syndicates in the state of Bolívar (Map 3). All the territory to the west and south of the Caura River basin remains under the control of FARC dissidents and the ELN, which may have prevented other OAGs from advancing into this area. This guerrilla dominance is also logically associated with preserving control of the geographic corridors and routes that connect with Colombia and the state of Apure, and through the state of Bolívar and the Orinoco River, thus guaranteeing the routes that allow them to transit freely from Colombia to the Atlantic Ocean and on toward international markets.



Map1. Distribution of OAGs by municipal districts south of the Orinoco River.

Source: SOSOrinoco.

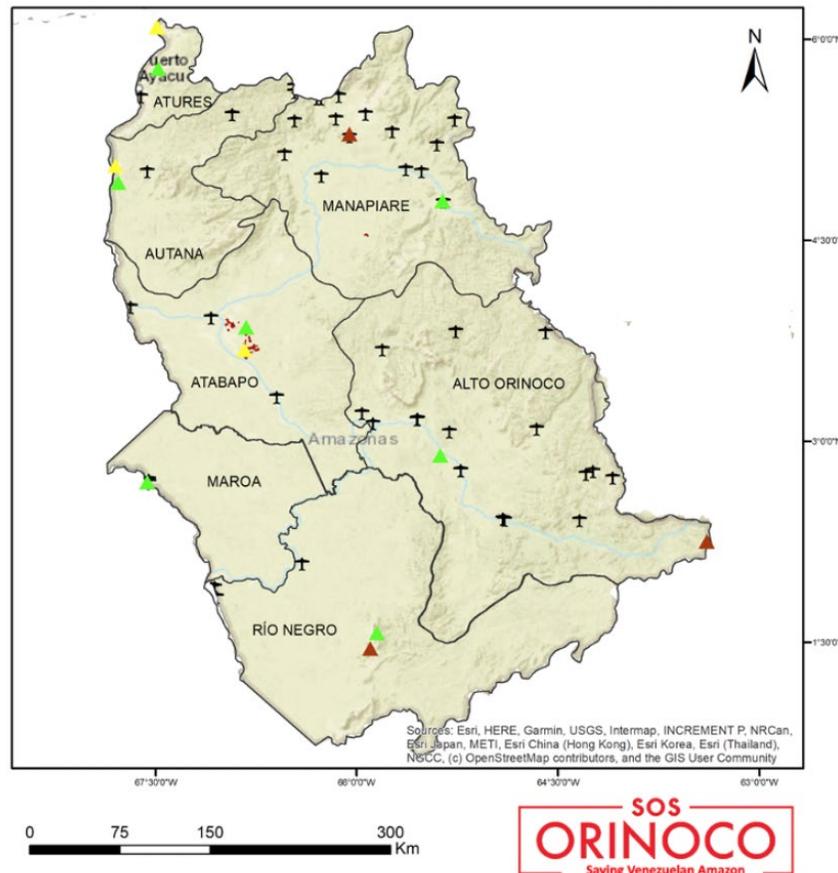
The greatest mining activity is concentrated in the eastern section of the state of Bolívar, east of the Caura River basin and, even more so, east of the Caroní River, and the highest concentration of OAGs in dispute is also observed. Ten criminal gangs or syndicates are present in this area, and the two major guerrilla groups (FARC dissidents and ELN) have also penetrated. As noted above, the municipal districts with the greatest OAG presence are Sifontes with 9, El Callao with 5 and Roscio with 4, which are the areas of greatest mining activity. Likewise, of the five most violent municipal districts in the country, these three municipal districts in the mining area of the state of Bolívar have exceptionally high rates of violent deaths: El Callao municipal district with a rate of 511, Sifontes municipal district with 189 and Roscio municipal district with 125 per hundred thousand inhabitants (OVV, 2021).

ORGANIZED ARMED GROUPS IN THE STATE OF AMAZONAS

Allies of the State

- ▲ FARC Dissidents
- ▲ ELN
- ▲ Garimpeiros

- Mining Footprint
- † Landing Strips

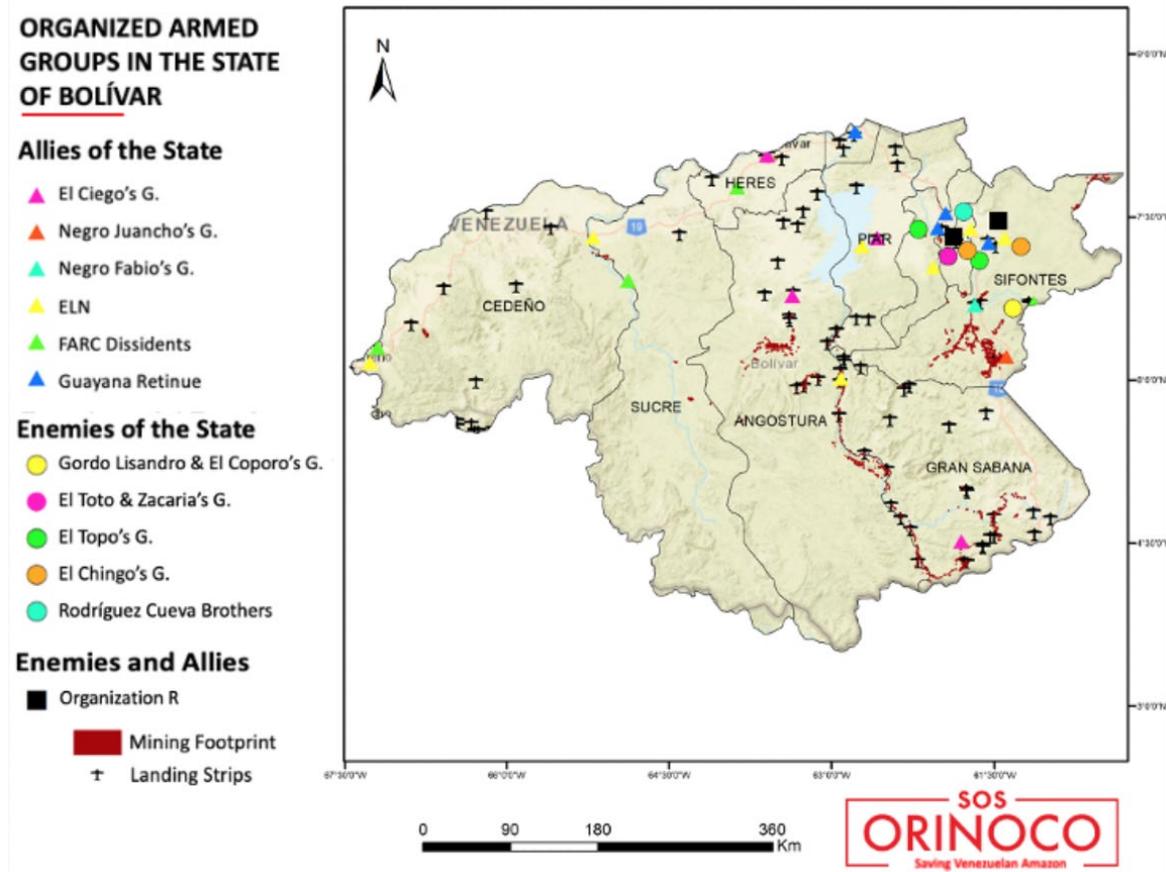


Map 2. Organized Armed Groups in the State of Amazonas

Source: SOSOrinoco.

Nonetheless, within these municipal districts there are areas that are under the dominion of a single OAG (Map 4). This is the case of El Negro Fabio's Gang in El Dorado and El Negro Juancho's Gang in Las Claritas, Km 88 and the rest of San Isidro parish, both in Sifontes municipal district. Similarly, El Ciego's Gang has maintained dominance in Angostura, Piar, Heres and Gran Sabana municipal districts. These OAGs are examples of how *pranes* have managed to impose themselves as sole bosses in their domains. On the other hand, the mining areas of El Callao, Tumeremo and Guasipati (in El Callao, Sifontes and Roscio municipal districts, respectively) have been a battleground between several OAGs fighting amongst themselves and against the state security forces.

Another key element that cannot be lost sight of is the issue of alliances with the national government, the state and local governments, the FANB and the state security forces. From the systematized information, the OAGs can be classified according to their position as allies or enemies (Table 2). The first thing that stands out is that most of the OAGs are allies of Nicolás Maduro's regime, 8 in total. On the other hand, 5 OAGs are at odds with the state forces. The case of Organization R is peculiar, because, at first, they were enemies of the government, but then they reached an agreement and now they are an allied organization that goes so far as to fulfill roles as a "social foundation" and political movement related to the Chavista government.



Map 3. Organized Armed Groups in the State of Bolívar

Source: SOSOrinoco.

It is also noteworthy that the geographic distribution of the OAGs that are enemies coincides precisely with the 3 municipal districts where the greatest disputes for the control of mines occur and where the highest rates of violent deaths in the country are reported: El Callao, Sifontes and Roscio. The fight against these enemy OAGs by the FANB, the state security forces and other allied OAGs, particularly the ELN, may partly explain the high levels of conflict and violence in these municipal districts.

	Allies	Enemies	
El Ciego's Gang	Angostura, Piar, Heres, Gran Sabana	El Chingo's Gang	El Callao, Sifontes
El Negro Fabio's Gang	Sifontes	El Topo's Gang	Sifontes, Roscio
El Negro Juancho's Gang	Sifontes	El Toto and Zacarías's Gang	El Callao
National Liberation Army (ELN)	Atures, Autana, Atabapo, Cedeño, Sifontes, El Callao, Sucre, Angostura, Roscio, Piar	El Gordo Lisandro and El Coporo's Gang	Sifontes
FARC Dissidents	Atures, Autana, Atabapo, Manapiare, Maroa, Río Negro, Upper Orinoco, Cedeño, Sucre, Angostura, Sifontes	Rodríguez Cueva Brothers	Roscio
<i>Garimpeiros</i>	Upper Orinoco, Manapiare, Río Negro		
Guayana Retinue	Caroní, Roscio, Sifontes, El Callao		
Organization R	Sifontes, El Callao	Organization R	Sifontes, El Callao

Table 2. Classification of the OAGs according to the type of relation they have with the State.

Fuente: SOSOrinoco.

Finally, looking at the trajectory of the OAGs in a timeline (Table 3), several elements stand out. The first OAGs appeared in 2008, as in the case of El Negro Juancho's Gang. The *garimpeiros* have actually been present in the area since much earlier, at least since the 1990s, but they reappeared in a significant way after 2008. The case of the Rodríguez Cueva brothers is unique, because at the beginning they were not an OAG, but a family with a gold concession legally granted by the state in Guasipati (Roscio municipal district), but since 2010 they had to arm themselves to prevent criminal gangs from Ciudad Guayana and Ciudad Bolívar from taking over the mines. It is also noteworthy that the three OAGs that have been eliminated were in conflict with state forces: El Chingo's Gang, El Topo's Gang and the Rodríguez Cueva Brothers. Only two OAGs that are enemies of the government have managed to persist to the present: El Toto and Zacarías's Gang and the remnants of El Coporo's Gang, which is currently led by alias "El Talao." On the other hand, all government-allied OAGs that emerged between 2008 and 2016 are extant to this day.

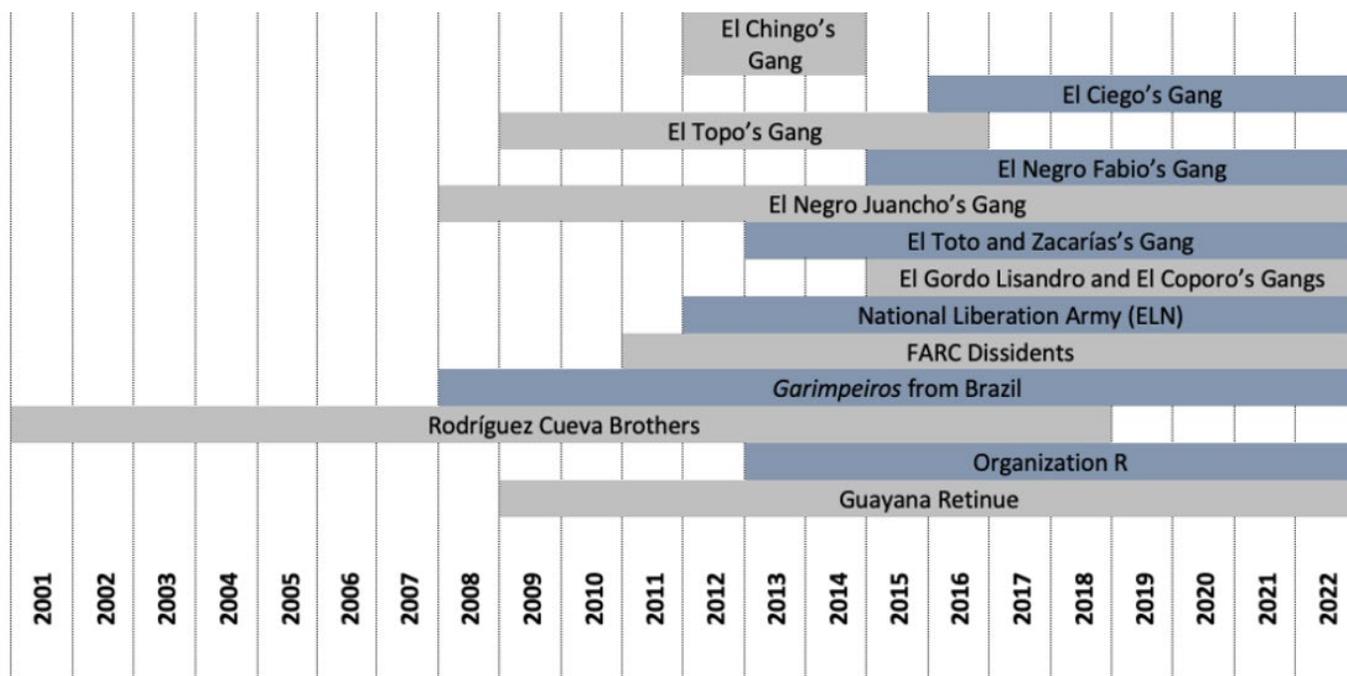


Table 3. Timeline for the trajectory of the OAGs.

Source: SOSOrinoco.

ORGANIZED ARMED GROUPS IN THE STATE OF BOLÍVAR

Allies of the State

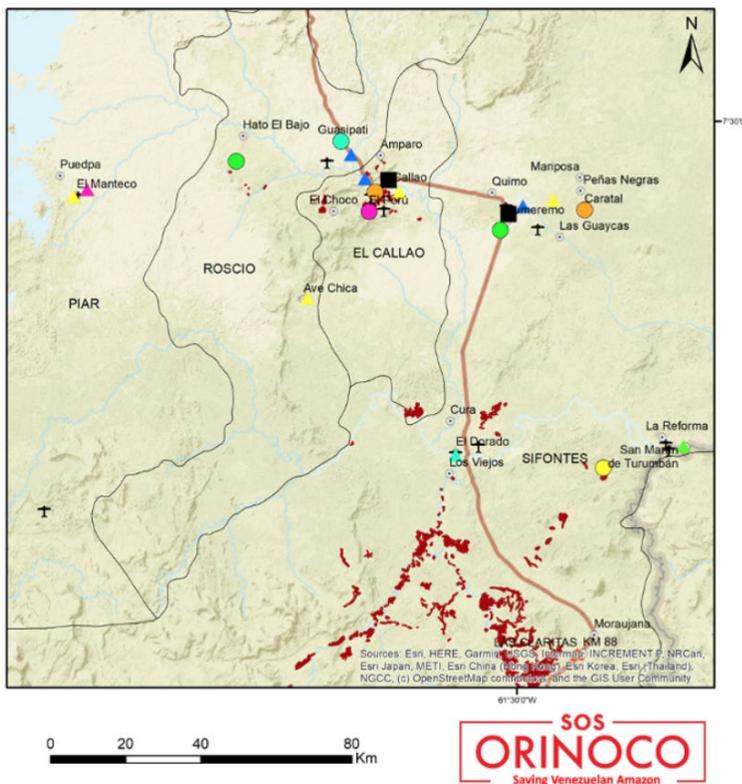
- ▲ El Ciego's G.
- ▲ Negro Juancho's G.
- ▲ Negro Fabio's G.
- ▲ ELN
- ▲ FARC Dissidents
- ▲ Guayana Retinue

Enemies of the State

- Gordo Lisandro & El Coporo's G.
- El Toto & Zacaria's G.
- El Topo's G.
- El Chingo's G.
- Rodríguez Cueva Brothers

Enemies and Allies

- Organization R
- Mining Footprint
- † Landing Strips
- Towns near the area of action by the OAGs



Map 4. Organized Armed Groups in the State of Bolívar .

Source: SOSOrinoco.



CHAPTER 3

Presence and activity of the OAGs in the states of Amazonas and Bolívar in the mining context

CHAPTER 3

Presence and activity of the OAGs in the states of Amazonas and Bolívar in the mining context

Banda de El Chingo (Snub-Nosed's Gang)

Also known as "Mining Syndicalists" Gang

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	El Callao		Remington
Bolívar	Sifontes		Caratal
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory</p> <p>Yeferson de Jesús López Sifontes, better known as "El Chingo" (Snub-Nosed), was the leader of the "Sindicalistas de la Minería" (Mining Syndicalists) that operated until 2014 mainly in El Callao. "El Chingo's" gang had 22 members. "El Chingo" was accused of committing more than 15 homicides in the mining areas of El Callao and Sifontes municipal districts, including the murder of six miners and two policemen. The criminal gang accounted for more than 29 homicides in different mines between December 2013 and July 2014 alone.</p> <p>Furthermore, the "Mining Syndicalists" gang was responsible for the attack, firing more than 100 bullets, on police headquarters in El Callao, where they killed one of its officers in the El Perú sector. This group is also linked to the theft of more than 25 kilos of gold from the CVG subsidiary Minerven's vault.</p> <p>On 28 August 2014, the people of El Callao carried out a civic strike in protest against the large number of violent acts and the lack of security measures. In response, the Secretariat of Citizen Security of the Bolivar State Government organized an operation in Roscio, El Callao and Sifontes municipal districts, with the participation of the SEBIN, the PEB, the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) and other security agencies. Consequently, "El Chingo," together with other members of his gang, fled to Ciudad Guayana.</p> <p>"El Chingo" was captured on 16 September 2014 in Puerto Ordaz, when he was leaving a clinic. Gilberto Joaquín Rojas and David Josué Calzadilla Calvo, alias "El Tortuga" (The Turtle), who accompanied him, were also arrested. There were outstanding arrest warrants for "El Chingo" for homicide issued by the 2nd and 5th Control Court of the State of Bolivar, while there were outstanding warrants for the arrest of "El Tortuga" for homicide, one for injuries and one for escape from the Venezuela General Penitentiary at San Juan de Los Morros. "El Tortuga" was carrying a false identity card bearing the name of Sabbat José Mosqueda Griman.</p> <p>Unlike other criminal gangs, this group did not have the approval of the regional government and this cost them countless casualties at the hands of the Scientific, Criminal and Criminalistic Investigations Corps (CICPC), the Army, the National Guard, SEBIN, the DGCIM and the Bolivar State Police. The capture of "El Chingo" meant the disappearance of the group and the death - at the hands of rivals - of most of its members. Half of his domain passed into the hands of alias "Capitán" (Captain) of the "Tren de Guayana" (Guayana Retinue) and the other half to the "El Toto" gang of the "Sindicato de El Perú" (El Perú Syndicate).</p>			
<p>Economic activity</p> <p>Drug trafficking, human trafficking, fuel and food smuggling, gold trade and extortion.</p>			
<p>Name(s) of leader(s) and other members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yeferson de Jesús López Sifontes (age 20), alias "El Chingo" - David Josué Calzadilla Calvo (age 23), alias "El Tortuga" (The Turtle) - Gilberto Joaquín Rojas (age 47), "El Chingo's" uncle 			

Nearby or related mines Former facilities belonging to the state-owned Minerven company, known as the Remington Mine, Caratal Mine and La Calicata Mine.	
Type of event	Date of event
More than 29 homicides at different mines	December 2013 - July 2014
Massacre at Barrio Finlandia in El Callao, where six people died	January 1st, 2014
Attack against police headquarters in the El Perú sector of El Callao, where Officer Osman Josué Cedeño Ochoa died	April 11th, 2014
Theft of more than 25 kilos of gold from the vault of Minerven, a subsidiary of CVG	June 29th, 2014
Ambush on the main street of the Nuevo México sector of Ciudad Bolívar, where a police unit was attacked by 15 individuals belonging to the "El Chingo's" gang, in which Officer Asdrúbal José Belisario died	August 24th, 2014
More than 29 homicides at different mines	January 1st, 2014
Victim Dozens of victims, among them six miners and two policemen that were murdered.	
Enemy Scientific, Criminal and Criminalistic Investigations Corps (CICPC), Army, National Guard, SEBIN, DGCIM, Bolívar State Police.	
Sources Maffia, 2014; Dam, 2014; Redacción EDG, 2015; Transparencia Vzla, 2019.	

Banda de El Ciego (Blind Man's Gang)

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Angostura	Barceloneta	La Paragua and mining areas in the Paragua River basin
Bolívar	Piar	Pedro Cova	El Manteco
Bolívar	Heres		Ciudad Bolívar
Bolívar	Gran Sabana	Icabarú	Icabarú
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory According to some police sources, their center of operations is located in Tocomita, a small town near Ciudad Piar (seat of the municipal district), where invasions were reported. It is one of the most active gangs at present and operates mainly in El Manteco, but also in La Paragua and sometimes in Ciudad Bolívar. There is news of the actions of this criminal gang at least since 2016. They control the mines in the area of La Paragua and also gold mining in the area of El Manteco, in the Piar municipal district. There are indications that they have made incursions outside their area, specifically in the Icabarú River basin, where a massacre took place in 2019. They are still active, although some members of the gang have been arrested.</p>			
<p>Economic activity They profit from the work of the miners, from whom they extort, and they also collect protection money known as “vaccines” and also extort money from traders, farmers and cattle ranchers. Like other armed groups, they set the price of gold, enforce curfews and other violent measures on the population in their area of influence.</p>			
<p>Name(s) of leader(s) and other members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - El Ciego's name is Reiniero Alberto Murgueytio Bastardo. He is at large. - Braunis González Miranda, arrested in late 2019. - Jorge de Lourerio Padrón, alias “El Iguano”, killed in August of 2021 in a confrontation with the National Guard. - Keisser Ramses Hernández Cedeño, alias “El Cirujano” (The Surgeon), killed together with de Lourerio. - Ricardo José Ratia Blanco, arrested in June of 2021. - Carlos Anderson Cabello Camacho, arrested in June of 2021. - Jorge Luis León Rico, arrested in June of 2021. - Felni Figuera Bustillo, - Arrested in June of 2021. The four individuals were apprehended by the National Guard and their military weapons and ammunition were confiscated. 			
<p>Nearby or related mines Different mines situated along the La Paragua River.</p>			

<p>Type of event El Ciego was reported in the country's news media as the leader of the gang that carried out the massacre at Icabarú, in the upper basin of the Caroní River, anonymously accused by local inhabitants within a setting where a high degree of impunity prevailed. The attack perpetrated in the town of Icabarú left eight people dead, four of them belonging to the indigenous Pemón community living in Gran Sabana municipal district, bordering Brazil.</p>	<p>Date of event November 22nd, 2019</p>
<p>Alliances There are suspicions that there is a partnership with entities of the government forces, specifically with the Office of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM), an entity that is very active in the gold mining areas of Bolivar. According to the accusations made around the days of the massacre by leaders of the Pemón ethnic group, such as Ricardo Delgado, who attributed the massacre to the Nicolás Maduro regime and affirmed that presumed officials "of the SEBIN and DGCIM used the "Syndicate" gang as a front to take control of this important mining area."</p>	
<p>Sources Ansalatina, 2019; Insight Crime, 2021b; Ostos, 2021; Ramírez, 2022; Ramírez, Poliszuk and Segovia, 2022; Transparencia Venezuela, 2019; Suniaga, 2022; Moreno, 2021; Granados, 2016.</p>	

Banda de El Topo (The Mole's Gang)

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Sifontes	Tumeremo	Tumeremo and the mining camps in that parish
Bolívar	Roscio	Roscio	Mines near Sifontes municipal district
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory</p> <p>This was one of the most violent armed groups operating in the mining areas of Sifontes municipal district in the state of Bolivar. "El Topo," who had been a paramilitary in Colombia, was the most feared, but seldom seen, man in Tumeremo, where around 100 mining camps operate clandestinely, without institutional control. "El Topo" was the one who brought to the state of Bolivar the practice of dismembering people by the use of chainsaws. According to press reports, he was the leader of an important part of these mining operations, which he controlled with his armed group, offering security for which he charged the miners in gold. He became head of the gang in June 2009, when his brother "El Negro Aurelio," who was the initial leader of his group, clashed with Nelson Murillo, "El Niche" (The Black Man), the boss in the area up until then. In the confrontation, both were killed and the baton passed into the hands of "El Topo." From then on, the new boss put together an organization with increasingly strong firepower that allowed him to gradually win over more mining camps, in the Tumeremo area as well as in adjoining areas. In March 2016, he and his people were identified as having murdered 17 people that were at one of the mines, which led to protests in Tumeremo. Meanwhile he was becoming one of the most wanted criminals in the country. Two months later, in May, he died in an exchange of gunfire with the police. At the same time, several members of his group were arrested.</p>			
<p>Economic activity</p> <p>Control of small-scale mining. With their armed men (said to be 60 individuals) they took over surveillance of the gold mining areas and extorted from the miners a percentage of the gold that was extracted there; the press reported in 2016 that they kept 30% of the precious metal.</p>			
<p>Name(s) of leader(s) and other members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jamilton Andrés Ulloa Suárez, alias "El Topo": principal leader of the gang. Ecuadorian nationality, resident in Venezuela since 2002. Considered among the most bloodthirsty. According to published information, he started in the mines as just another worker who came to the area with his family to extract gold. - Rosa Gil Salazar, arrested in May 2016, was identified as "El Topo's" main collaborator. - Yenni Ulloa, alias "La Bacha," Jamilton's sister. - Harry Ulloa, "El Topo's" brother. - Luis Tomás Rivera Malavé, arrested. - Others who were arrested in May 2016, accused of being co-perpetrators of multiple homicides, specifically: Francisco David Carache Zambrano, Dennis Renier Cardozo, Eduardo José Iglesias López, Rodolfo Andredy Castrillón Castro, Publio Evelio Martínez Suárez (the latter two are natives of Colombia); Manuel Alejandro Balaguera and Carlos Alonso Balaguera. 			
<p>Nearby or related mines</p> <p>Atenas, Hoja de Lata, and others.</p>			

Type of event	Date of event
<p>Tumeremo Massacre: El Topo became nationally known in March of 2016, when a massacre in one of the mining camps controlled by his gang, at the mine known as Atenas, was made public. At least 17 miners were killed at that gold deposit, which had been exploited since 2005. Their mutilated bodies were found in a mass grave a few meters from the camp. It should be noted that the number of missing persons linked to the case was 28.</p>	<p>March 4th, 2016</p>
<p>Alliances According to what was published in the press at the time of the massacre, the gang had alliances with the regional police forces.</p>	
<p>Sources El Nacional, 2016; Silva Franco, 2016; Insight Crime, 2021; Runrun.es, 2016; Transparencia Venezuela, 2020, CERLAS 2019; Correo del Caroní, El Pitazo, Runrun.es, 2016.</p>	

Banda de El Negro Fabio - Black Man Fabio's Gang

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Sifontes	Dalla Costa	Mining zones of El Dorado
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory</p> <p>This criminal gang has been operating in the El Dorado sector, in the southern part of Bolívar's Sifontes municipal district for several years. The members of this gang control irregular groups and the local mining "syndicate." In addition to extorting from miners and controlling gold mining, this criminal group is accused of belonging to a national and international network involved in human trafficking aimed at sexual exploitation. The young women are transferred under the deception of a better life in the mining areas of Bolivar. However, this gang is also known for illicitly transporting and trading in military weapons. According to journalistic investigations, "El Negro Fabio" was arrested in November 2017 by officials of the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB), in Upata, Piar municipal district and was presented before the Public Prosecutor's Office, but a few hours later he was released. This, despite the fact that a warrant for the arrest of this criminal had already been issued by the Third Instance Court - for the crime of smuggling strategic materials. This is one of the gangs that operate in the mining area of Bolivar with greatest intensity. According to the Prosecutor's Office, the forces of public order have fought on several occasions against this group, which operates in and around the El Dorado deposits. In one of the most recent confrontations between members of his armed group and members of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB), at least eight of "Negro Fabio's" men died on the banks of the Chikanán River. He is said to have a large number of armed men and to be better equipped than the military itself, power he uses to keep the area under his control and neutralize politicians and other gangs.</p>			
<p>Economic activity</p> <p>Extortion from miners, merchants and producers; abduction and human trafficking of women; weapons and drug trafficking and murder by hire, among other irregular activities. This group imposes violent rules in areas controlled by them.</p>			
<p>Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fabio Enrique González Isaza, alias "El Negro Fabio," is the leader of this gang. - Roberto Antonio Espejo. Reportedly second in command of this gang at El Dorado. - J.A Reyes Chueco. He was captured in San Félix in June of 2021 with USD 650,000 in cash, firearms and ammunition in his possession. 			
<p>Nearby or related mines</p> <p>Includes all the gold mines in Dalla Costa parish. In other words, this gang controls El Dorado.</p>			
Type of event		Date of event	
<p>There are have been many incidents, but perhaps the murder of the Pemón medical student, Óscar Eliézer Meya, stands out. He was tortured and murdered by members of the "Negro Fabian" syndicate in May 2018, just for being the brother of the captain of the indigenous community of San Luis de Morichal, an indigenous people that have been fighting for years to get rid of these criminal groups that have been scourging them.</p>		<p>May 13th, 2018</p>	
<p>Alliances</p> <p>Office of the Governor of the State of Bolívar during the administration of Division General Francisco Rangel Gómez (2004-2017): allocation of weapons, ammunition and cash.</p>			
<p>Sources</p> <p>El Nacional, 2016; Insight Crime, 2021b; López, 2017; Vitti, 2018; Ostos, 2021; Ramírez, 2022; Ramírez, Poliszuk y Segovia, 2022; Transparencia Venezuela, 2019.</p>			

Banda del Negro Juancho (Black Man Juancho's Gang)

Also known as Sindicato del Negro Juancho - Black Man Juancho's Syndicate

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Sifontes	San Isidro	Las Claritas, Km 88, Las Brisas-Las Cristinas
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory This is one of the first armed groups with the longest trajectory in the southern part of the state of Bolívar. Under its control are the town of Las Claritas, Km 88 and the mines of the San Isidro parish of Sifontes municipal district, including the Las Brisas-Las Cristinas mine. Since 2008, when the assets of the foreign companies Gold Reserve and Cristallex were seized by the government, this mine containing the largest gold deposits in Venezuela ended up in the hands of this organized crime group.</p>			
<p>Economic activity Illegal mining, extortion, abductions, homicides, theft, drug trafficking and hired killings. This group enforces curfews, extorts from the merchants and fixes the price of gold.</p>			
<p>Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Juan Gabriel Rivas Núñez, alias "Juancho": main leader or pran (a prison gang leader that's head of a gang). Of Colombian origin, he has dual nationality and also has a second identity under the name of "Wilson Starling Aponte Rodríguez." - Humberto Martes, known as "El Viejo Humberto" (Old Man Humberto): second in command, along with his son, nicknamed "Humbertico." - Darwin Guevara or "El Viejo" (The Old Man): controls everything that happens in the mines surrounding the town and is in charge of the alcabala (checkpoint) at the entrance to the Las Brisas-Las Cristinas mines. 			
<p>Nearby or related mines The gang's domain encompasses the mines known as Cuatro Muertos, La Leona, El Mecate, Caolín, Las Cristinas, Morichalito, San Isidro, Morrocoy, Potazo, Mesones, Piedra Dura, La Pelota, El Portón, Maluga, Cuyuní, Brisas, La Papaya, La California, La Gusanera, San Marcos, Dinamita, El Playón and the rest of the gold deposits on the banks of the Cuyuní River, within the perimeter of San Isidro parish.</p>			
Type of event			Date of event
Confrontations with the Sororopán, Inaway, San Miguel, Araima Tepui and Hoboshirima indigenous communities.			January 23rd, 2022
<p>Alliances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Office of the Governor of the State of Bolívar during the administration of Division General Francisco Rangel Gómez (2004-2017): allocation of arms, ammunition and money. - Brigadier General Julio César Fuentes Manzulli, Secretary of Citizen Security and Commander of the Bolívar State Police (2006 - 2014). - Links to civilian and military authorities of the Venezuelan State, including senior army chiefs involved in the structure. - The Aragua Retinue, through one of its main pran (prison gang leaders), Johan Romero, alias "Johan Petrica". 			
<p>Sources El Nacional, 2016; Insight Crime, 2021; López, 2017; Ostos, 2021; Ramírez, 2022; Ramírez, Poliszuk y Segovia, 2022; Transparencia Venezuela, 2019.</p>			

Banda de El Toto y Zacarías (El Toto and Zacarías's Gang)

Also known as El Sindicato de El Perú (El Perú Syndicate), or Base de El Perú (El Perú Base) or Frente Revolución Perú (Perú Revolution Front)

State	Municipal District	Location
Bolívar	El Callao	El Perú
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory</p> <p>This gang has been active in El Callao municipal district since approximately 2013. It is known as “El Sindicato de El Perú” (El Peru Syndicate). “El Perú” is in reference to a town near El Callao that serves as its center of operations. They also call themselves “La Base de El Perú” (El Perú Base) or “Frente Revolución Perú” (Peru Revolution Front)</p> <p>At El Callao, criminal groups that emerged in local mining communities began to fight against the criminal fiefdom of former General Francisco Rangel Gómez, governor of the state of Bolivar until 2017. The most powerful of these groups was “El Toto's,” which emerged in a space occupied by many of the mines that the CVG's subsidiary Minerven had abandoned.</p> <p>In 2018, with the arrival of General Justo Noguera Pietri to the governorship of Bolivar, the fate of those groups changed, particularly that of the “El Perú Syndicate.” The Army, as well as military counterintelligence officers, were ordered to penetrate the territories controlled by this group, but at the forefront of the operations appeared a new armed group invited in by the government: the ELN guerrilla forces from Colombia.</p> <p>On 15 October 2019, Nicolás Maduro announced a plan to assign gold mines to state governors as a way of financing their jurisdictions, thus unleashing conflict in the mining areas of Bolívar. On 5 November 2019 pamphlets appeared on the streets of El Callao, with a message from “El Toto” threatening the mayor of El Callao, Alberto Hurtado, and demanding his resignation. The municipal district was already on alert after the appearance of a decapitated person days earlier. The terror campaign was unleashed, and “El Toto” as well as other gangs that controlled gold mines in Bolívar had no intention of giving up their fiefdoms. Faced with this, the Maduro regime decided to open an offensive using the concentrated forces of the State, which “El Toto's” gang resisted by fighting back violently. This resistance became a symbol of the Venezuelan state's inability to control one of its last economic lifelines: gold. The gang has released videos with messages addressed to the government, some of them in a tone of negotiation. The response of the Executive has been to send more troops to El Callao and to declare a curfew for residents. The increased military presence in the area has led gang members to move to other mining areas in Bolívar, such as Nacupay.</p> <p>Since then, this group has lost strength, although they continue to carry out extremely violent actions such as the kidnapping of Wuihelm Torrellas Martínez, a member of the ruling party, the death of his bodyguard, and the ambush of military officials, using grenades, and which left many of leaving them wounded, in 2021, indicating that they are still active.</p>		
<p>Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alejandro Rafael Ochoa Sequea, alias “El Toto” - Eleomar José Vargas Vargas, alias “Zacarías” 		
<p>Nearby or related mines</p> <p>Mining sectors of El Perú, Yin-Yan, La Janza, El Encanto, Nuevo México, Finlandia, Cuatro Esquinas, La Laguna, Panamá and La 45 at El Callao.</p>		

Type of event	Date of event
Under the mandate of Governor Justo Noguera, police operations became true military offensives. "El Toto's" territories were raided by some 200 military troops and police officers. The operation uncovered gruesome evidence of "El Toto's" reign of terror, including a mass grave containing 14 human skulls.	August, 2018
Seven people were killed and three others wounded by rifle shots at a bus stop in the city of San Félix, in the northern part of the state of Bolívar. The so-called "San Félix massacre" is attributed to Eleomar José Vargas, alias "Zacarías." According to the police account, "Zacarías" was having a fight with a member of another armed group that was at that bus stop and that is why he carried out the attack.	July 21st, 2019
The state security forces arrested 72 alleged members of "El Toto's" gang, killed another 26 and confiscated 28 weapons and more than 800 rounds of ammunition from the gang, from which they also seized drugs, gold, military uniforms and even a notebook with the inventory of its arsenal and the "accounting records" of the extortions perpetrated against the miners.	June 2020 - June 2021
Former member of the National Assembly, Wuihelm Torrellas Martínez, and his bodyguard were intercepted in El Perú by "El Toto's" gang. They demanded 15 kilos of gold for their release. Since the ransom did not come, they beheaded Torrellas's bodyguard. The former legislator managed to escape from his captors. Days later, a military unit was sent to the site where Torrellas had been held and found Torrellas' truck parked outside. Four agents were injured by the explosion of a grenade activated when they opened the door of the vehicle.	March 27th, 2021
"El Toto" and "Zacarías's" gang, in alliance with alias "El Talao," from Tumeremo, clashed with the gangs that control the Cairo, Belén and Tommy mines in the Nacupay sector, in Roscio and Sifontes municipal districts. They wanted to keep the entire sector because the government had been besieging them at El Perú.	April, 2021
Confrontation with officers of the DGCIM in the La Iguana sector of El Callao, resulting in one dead sergeant and three other soldiers wounded.	January, 2022
<p>Victim The total deaths attributed to "El Toto's" gang includes the murder of former municipal councilwoman Mara Valdez, folklorist Carlos Clark, and police, military intelligence and National Guard officers.</p>	
<p>Alliances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "El Talao's" gang - The Guayana Retinue 	
<p>Enemy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Governors of the state of Bolívar, Francisco Rangel Gómez and Justo Noguera Pietri - Alberto Hurtado, Mayor of El Callao - 51st Jungle Infantry Brigade of the State of Bolívar - Scientific, Penal and Criminal Investigations Corps (CICPC) - General Office of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) - ELN 	
<p>Sources Insight Crime, 2021b; Transparencia Venezuela, 2019; Flores, 2021; Ramírez, Poliszuk, Segovia, 2022; Ostos, 2021; Suniaga, 2020; El Periódico del Delta, 2021; Clisánchez, 2020; Tal Cual, 2022.</p>	

Bandas del Gordo Lisandro y El Coporo (Fat Man Lisandro and El Coporo's Gangs)

(Coporo refers to an Orinoco River fish - *Prochilodus mariae*)

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Sifontes		Tumeremo
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory</p> <p>Alexandro Lisandro González Montilla, known as "Gordo Lisandro," and Josué Enrique Zurita Arévalo, alias "Coporo," were the leaders of a criminal gang that controlled gold deposits in Tumeremo, Sifontes municipal district in the state of Bolívar.</p> <p>"El Gordo Lisandro" gained notoriety in the media following the Tumeremo massacre, in which 17 miners were killed on 4 March 2016 on the road to the Atenas mine. The massacre is attributed to "El Topo's" gang, who were seeking to wrest control of the area from "Gordo Lisandro." Jamilton Andrés Ulloa Suárez, alias "El Topo," was killed by the SEBIN's special forces two months after the Tumeremo massacre, at the El Limón mine, near Nuevo Callao.</p> <p>The demise of "El Topo" left the way clear for "El Gordo Lisandro," who commanded the Tumeremo mines until "El Coporo," his right-hand man, betrayed him in early July 2018. El "Gordo Lisandro" had to leave Bolívar and took refuge in Maracay, where he was kidnapped and then killed by CICPC officers of the state of Aragua. After the death of "Gordo Lisandro," "El Coporo" became the main criminal leader around Tumeremo. From that moment on, the gang was divided between "Those loyal to Lisandro," who sought to avenge their betrayed leader, and those who followed "El Coporo."</p> <p>On 14 October 2018, seven people were executed - six of them close to El Coporo's gang - and 16 others disappeared, on the Los Candados road, the route to enter the mines of Corre Gente, Bochinche, Cayena, Purgatorio, Telmo, Telmito, Bochinchito, among others. Miners and locals stated that the victimizer was the Colombian guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (ELN), who wanted to get "El Coporo's" gang out of these mines. However, the Governor of the State of Bolívar, Justo Noguera Pietri, and the head of the Strategic Region of Integral Defense (REDI) for Guayana, Jesus Mantilla Oliveros, denied the presence of the Colombian guerrilla in the state of Bolívar. They blamed the incident on the confrontation between "El Coporo's" criminal gangs and those loyal to "Gordo Lisandro". Despite this, neighbors and locals claim that the ELN has control over mines at Tumeremo and Guasipati, including El Tigre, Hoja Lata, Botanamo and La Camorra.</p> <p>On 27 October 2018, the Army and other security forces took over the La Caratica neighborhood of Tumeremo, seeking to dismantle the gang. The operation resulted in seven members of the gang killed and four military personnel wounded. The gang was not dismantled. "El Coporo" was already out of the area, and in hiding.</p> <p>On 7 February 2019, El Coporo was killed in a confrontation with officers of the Special Actions Brigade (BAE) of the CICPC, in San Diego, state of Carabobo. He was on the list of the most wanted criminals in the state of Bolívar. Between 2015 and 2018 there were nine active judicial files charging Zurita with various crimes, and the authorities had their sights on him for the Los Candados massacre, and furthermore, he had a police record with more than 18 homicides, extortions and kidnappings.</p> <p>After the death of Zurita, alias "El Talao" became leader of the gang, and he is now in a territorial dispute with the ELN and Organization 3R, led by "El Pelón" Natera, who in early 2019 became independent and settled in Tumeremo.</p>			

Economic activity Extortion, contract killings, collection of protection money (“vaccines”), forced labor, among other things.	
Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alexandro Lisandro González Montilla, alias “El Gordo Lisandro” (Fat Man Lisandro) - Josué Enrique Zurita Arévalo, alias “El Coporo” (age 26) - Adrián Romero Ara, alias “El Talao” 	
Nearby or related mines Atenas, Botanamo, El Limón, El Peregrino, Hoja de Lata I and Hoja de Lata II, Vuelvan Caras, San Martín de Turumbán, Anacoco, El Frío, Nuevo Callao, Corre Gente, Bochínche, Cayena, Purgatorio, Telmo, Telmito, Bochinchito.	
Type of event	Date of event
Massacre at Tumeremo: “El Topo’s” gang murdered 17 miners	March 4th, 2016
Alexandro Lisandro González Montilla’s bullet-riddled body was found at kilometer marker 63 of the <i>Autopista Regional del Centro</i> (main expressway in north-central Venezuela), state of Aragua	July 18th, 2018
Massacre at Los Candados: The ELN killed 7 people, 6 of them closely related to “El Coporo’s” gang. 16 other people disappeared.	October 14th, 2018
Operation conducted by the Army and other security forces in the La Caratica barrio of Tumeremo, aimed at dismantling the gang. Seven of the gang’s members were killed and four military men wounded.	October 27th, 2018
“El Coporo” was killed by officers of the CICPC at San Diego, state of Carabobo.	February 7th, 2019
Enemy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government of the state of Bolívar - FANB - ELN - CICPC - “El Gordo Lisandro’s” gang and those loyal to Lisandro - Organization 3R 	
Sources Transparencia Vzla, 2019; Faoro, 2019; Siverio, 2019; Insight Crime, 2021d; El Correo del Orinoco, 2016; Dam, 2018.	

National Liberation Army (ELN)

State	Municipal District	Location
Amazonas	Atures	Puerto Ayacucho, Picatonal, Palmar de Galipero, Provincial, Pozón de Babilla, Betania de Topocho, Cataniapo corridor
Amazonas	Autana	Sipapo River, Cuao, Guayapo, Autana, Isla Ratón
Amazonas	Atabapo	Yapacana National Park
Bolívar	Cedeño	Parguaza sector
Bolívar	Sifontes	Tumeremo, Hoja de Lata, Anacoco, San Martín de Turumbán
Bolívar	El Callao	El Callao
Bolívar	Sucre	Maripa, lower Caura River
Bolívar	Angostura	San Vicente de Paúl
Bolívar	Roscio	Guasipati
Bolívar	Piar	El Manteco

Presence and trajectory in the territory

The National Liberation Army (ELN), founded in 1964, is the principal Colombian guerrilla force today and one of the main threats at the national level in Colombia and Venezuela. They have had a historical presence on the border with Venezuela and on Venezuelan territory itself since the 1970s. Iván Duque has accused the Venezuelan government of providing support to ELN guerrillas and demanded the surrender of three members of the ELN's Central Command (COCE) who are allegedly in Venezuela. The presence of the ELN, supported by Nicolás Maduro, has been reported in 12 of the country's states, including the mining areas of Amazonas and Bolívar as part of a war that the guerrillas have declared against local Venezuelan mining mafias, with the aim of controlling these mines and exploiting their natural resources on behalf of the Venezuelan government.

In Amazonas and Bolívar, the guerrilla group has concentrated on wielding control over some of the mines and the Mining Arc, where they participate in the extractive activity, the commercialization of minerals and the collection of a tax for the extraction of ore. Precisely, the expansion around the mining project has allowed the group to encroach upon Venezuela's territory, from one end to the other, starting in the west and ending in the east.

After the signing of the Peace Accords in Colombia, a process of territorial rearrangements between the dissident groups of the FARC, the ELN and other criminal groups followed, both in Colombia and Venezuela. In the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, a sort of consortium was created between the FARC dissidents and the ELN, in close political and economic cooperation with civilian and military officials of the Venezuelan regime. This process allowed the ELN to position itself in several areas that were under FARC control until 2017.

The mines inside Yapacana National Park were initially under FARC control, but since 2016 they have passed over into the hands of that organization's dissidents, and between 2017 and 2018 the "ELN/FARC dissident" consortium had been established.

Yapacana is a key territorial element within the framework of the guerrilla forces' strategy, as it became a sort of "island-state" from where they continue to expand their territorial control south of the Venezuelan Orinoco, launder drug money via illegal trading in gold and other minerals such as coltan, and take advantage of our land, river and air spaces for drug trafficking. Most of the gold from Yapacana is traded through Colombia.

In an International Crisis Group report published in February 2019, a former ELN commander said the group derived 60% of its revenue from mining in Venezuela and Colombia. Apart from gold, the group is said to control coltan mines in Parguaza and several diamond mines in San Vicente de Paúl. These economies have contributed to the rapid evolution of the ELN from a Colombian insurgent group into a Colombian-Venezuelan army, with a presence in at least 12 Venezuelan states.

The expansion of the ELN and the FARC dissidents is not only related to their interest in mineral extraction, but also to the control of drug trafficking routes from the Colombian departments of Meta, Guaviare and Vichada into Venezuelan territory and abroad. They profit by providing security services or allowing transit and presence in the area.

Colombian guerrilla groups (ELN-FARC dissidents) have positioned themselves in the area thanks to their reaching out to indigenous communities, which is usually peaceful and facilitated by promises of aid. However, the invasion of indigenous territories, the construction of infrastructure, forced recruitment, the conscription of young people and the opening of mines have generated divisions, violent conflicts and unrest in the indigenous communities, prompting their migration to Colombia and Brazil, as well as the formation of self-defense groups called Guardias Territoriales Indígenas (Indigenous Territorial Guards). This situation has been especially evident in the municipal districts of Maroa, Atabapo, Autana, Atures, Cedeño and Sucre.

In the state of Amazonas, the ELN initially positioned itself in Atures municipal district. One of its first camps was set up in the Picatonal community, north of Puerto Ayacucho, in 2013. Its presence in the area increased and became evident in 2017, when an unprecedented wave of violence shook Puerto Ayacucho. That year, the state of Amazonas ranked third among the most violent entities in the country, with a rate of 146 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. In addition, it was the second state in the number of contract killings. The unusual wave of murders in 2017 and 2018 in Puerto Ayacucho has been attributed to a campaign of "enforcement" undertaken by the ELN.

Another event that evidenced the presence of the ELN in the area occurred on 4 November 2018. On that day, Luis Felipe Ortega Bernal, alias "Garganta" (Throat), head of the José Daniel Pérez Front of the ELN, was captured by GNB, CICPC and Army troops in the Picatonal community. That same day, in retaliation for the capture of its leader, a GNB commission traveling in official vehicles was ambushed by the guerrilla group in the same sector located 15 minutes north of Puerto Ayacucho. In the attack 3 soldiers died and 10 others were wounded.

Since mid-2018 there has been evidence of ELN presence in Sifontes municipal district in the state of Bolívar, up to the border with Guyana. In Bolívar, starting with the arrival of General Justo Noguera Pietri to the governorship of the state, a new strategy was implemented to bring order to the anarchic mining region and channel its wealth to the Chavista elite. "Operation Metal Hands" was launched in June 2018 as a new offensive against syndicates and gold traffickers. Some criminal gangs that were not aligned with the government were fought, and several pranes (prison gang leaders) were eliminated by the armed forces and other state security bodies, but the government invited the ELN, especially as a way of supporting this task and paving the way for the Orinoco Mining Arc project.

On 14 October 2018, seven people were executed and 16 others disappeared, on the Los Candados highway, the route to enter the mines of Corregente, Bochinche, Cayena, Purgatorio, Telmo, Telmito, Bochinchito, among others, in the Imataca Forest Reserve, near Tumeremo, Sifontes municipal district in the state of Bolívar. Miners and locals stated that the perpetrator was the the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla force, who wanted to get "El Coporo's" gang out of these mines. However, the Governor of Bolívar State, Justo Noguera Pietri, and the head of the Integral Defense for the Strategic Region (REDI) Guayana, Jesus Mantilla Oliveros, denied the presence of the Colombian guerrilla in the state of Bolívar. They blamed the incident on the confrontation between "El Coporo's" criminal gang and those loyal to "Gordo Lisandro". Despite this, residents of Tumeremo presume that it was an ambush by the guerrilla group, in revenge for the death of five members of their ranks at the hands of "El Coporo's" gang, an event that occurred on 26 August 2018 at a mine in the area. This event was confirmed by Lieutenant Colonel Ernesto Solís, then commander of the Tarabay military base, near where the events occurred. He pointed out that the group that committed the massacre was a guerrilla group calling itself the "Che Guevara Movement." Neighbors and locals state that the ELN has control over mines in Tumeremo and Guasipati, among them El Tigre, Hoja Lata, Botanamo and La Camorra.

In some regions of Bolívar, such as El Callao, the guerrilla force could not overcome the resistance of the mining gangs. In other areas the guerrillas withdrew from the mines they had taken over. It appears that by mid-2020 their presence in eastern Bolívar was already greatly reduced.

In early January of 2022, the ELN attacked the Barrancas del Orinoco Syndicate, based in Barrancas del Orinoco, on the banks of the Orinoco River in the state of Monagas. For at least a decade, the criminal organization known as the Barrancas Syndicate has had control of the strategic route along the Orinoco River that serves as an outlet to the Atlantic. The ELN's capture of this stronghold is crucial for controlling the river route, which will allow free passage from Colombia to the Atlantic Ocean. This is a key route for moving drugs, gasoline, humans, and other contraband toward international markets. In addition, Barrancas del Orinoco is an important point for accessing chemical supplies and securing a mining labor force, essential elements for ELN interests in the mining areas of the state of Bolívar.

Economic activity

Smuggling gasoline, diesel fuel, food, cocaine and weapons, control of mining operations and extortion.

Name(s) of leader(s) and other members

- Luis Felipe Ortega Bernal, alias "Garganta" (Throat), Chief of the José Daniel Pérez Carrero Front
- Alias "Pedro Pablo"
- Alias "Domingo"

Nearby or related mines

- Mines inside Yapacana National Park: Cacique, La 40, La 44, La 50, Fibril, Jerusalén, Moyo, Maraya, etc.
- Mines along the Guayapo and Cuao rivers, Sipapo River basin (Autana municipal district)
- Coltan mines (Atures and Cedeño municipal districts)
- Mines along the upper and lower Caura River (Sucre municipal district): Yuruani, La Bullita, Fijiriña and San Pablo
- Mines at Cicapra, El Caolín, Campanero, El Cuadro, Florinda, El Muertico (Roscio municipal district)
- Mines at Corregente, Bochínche, Cayena, Purgatorio, Telmo, Telmito, Bochinchito, El Tigre, Hoja Lata, Botanamo, La Camorra, etc. (Tumeremo and Guasipati)
- Mines at El Manteco (Piar municipal district)

Type of event

Date of event

Inhabitants of Guasipati, Roscio municipal district, reported the murder of 20 people resulting from the incursion of members of the ELN aimed at controlling the mines at: Cicapra, El Caolín, Campanero, El Cuadro, Florinda and el Muertico, which had been under the control of the Rodríguez Cueva brothers.	May 7th, 2018
Beginning of "Operation Hands of Metal," a new offensive against the "syndicates" and gold traffickers not aligned with the Maduro regime. The ELN lent its support acting as the offensive vanguard.	June, 2018
Massacre at Los Candados: The ELN ambushed several people as they left the Corregente mine, which was controlled by "El Coporo's" gang. They killed 7 people, while another 16 disappeared, in revenge for the death of five members of their ranks on 26 August 2018 at the hands of "El Coporo's" gang.	October 14th, 2018
Capture of Luis Felipe Ortega Bernal, alias "Garganta" (Throat), Chief of the José Daniel Pérez Front of the ELN, by troops of the GNB, the CICPC and the Army. In reprisal, the guerrilla group attacked a GNB commission in the Picatonal sector, north of Puerto Ayacucho. In the attack, 3 soldiers died and another 10 were wounded.	November 4th, 2018

Eight deaths resulted from a confrontation between the ELN and the <i>pranes</i> (prison gang leaders) over control of the mines at El Manteco, Piar municipal district, in the state of Bolívar	January 17th, 2020
Assembly of Piarao communities convened at the Pendare indigenous community of the Sipapo River, with the participation of representatives from the ELN and the FARC dissidents. The indigenous inhabitants demanded that these forces withdraw from their territory.	February 23rd, 2020
Reports concerning the presence of the ELN along the lower Caura River, rendering protective services for the installation of mining rafts along the river. They seized control of El Playón and other locations in the area.	May 2020 and subsequent months
A teacher by the name of María Hernández and her husband were murdered by men belonging to the ELN at the El Kino mine, lower Caura River sector, Ariapao parish, Sucre municipal district, state of Bolívar	March 27th, 2021
José Dacosta, a teacher belonging to the Jivi ethnic group, was executed by the ELN at the mine known as “La 40” in Yapacana. After protests by the inhabitants, a commission from the GNB and an indigenous commission found the body in a clandestine cemetery where the ELN had already buried more than 30 victims.	April 5th, 2021
Attacks by the ELN against the Barrancas del Orinoco Syndicate, on the banks of the Orinoco River, in the state of Monagas, resulted in at least 10 deaths and several persons wounded. The confrontations were a response by the ELN to displace the Barrancas Syndicate and seize control of this area along the Orinoco River, a key for the transportation of contraband, illegal mining and drug trafficking.	January 1st and 13th, 2022
<p>Victims</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 20 deaths in the seizure of the mines at Guasipati, Roscio municipal district - 7 dead and 16 disappeared resulting from the Massacre at Los Candados - 3 GNB dead and 10 wounded resulting from the ambush at Picatonal - 8 dead at the El Manteco mines, Piar municipal district - María Hernández and her husband at the El Kino mine, lower Caura River - José Dacosta and at least 30 other victims in Yapacana - 10 dead and several wounded in attacks against the Barrancas del Orinoco Syndicate 	
<p>Alliances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nicolás Maduro regime - Amazonas and Bolívar state governments - FANB - Dissidents of the FARC - Los Puntilleros del Vichada (Colombian) - Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia 	<p>Enemy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rodríguez Cueva Brothers - “El Toto” and “Zacarías’s” gang - Organization R - “El Gordo Lisandro” and “El Coporo’s” gangs
<p>Sources</p> <p>Siverio, 2019; Insight Crime, 2021b, 2021d, 2021e, 2022; Ramírez, 2018; CERLAS, 2019; Ejército de Liberación Nacional (Colombia), 2022; SOSOrinoco, 2019, 2020a; Bargent y Rainsford, 2020; Insight Crime, 2019; Ramírez, Poliszukh y Segovia, 2022; Segovia, Poliszukh y Ramírez, 2022; LACSO-OVV, 2017, 2018; El Nacional, 2018a, 2018b; CERLAS, 2020; Barráez, 2021.</p>	

FARC Dissidents (Acacio Medina Front and the Second Marquetalia)

State	Municipal District	Location
Amazonas	Atures	Puerto Ayacucho, Coromoto, Agua Linda, Samariapo
Amazonas	Autana	Isla Ratón, Caño Grulla, Guayapo River, Autana River, Sipapo River, Janacome
Amazonas	Atabapo	Atabapo River, San Fernando de Atabapo, Yapacana National Park
Amazonas	Manapiare	San Juan de Manapiare, Puerto Unión, Sabanita, Cacurí
Amazonas	Maroa	San Miguel River, Yavita-Maroa highway
Amazonas	Río Negro	Casiquiare River, Aracamuni, Capibara
Amazonas	Alto Orinoco	Tamatama, La Esmeralda, Chigüire
Bolívar	Cedeño	Lower Parguaza
Bolívar	Sucre	Maripa, Las Trincheras, El Playón, Las Pavas
Bolívar	Angostura	La Cochinerá
Bolívar	Sifontes	San Martín de Turumbán

Presence and trajectory in the territory

The establishment of the Acacio Medina Front became official in 2012 on the banks of the San Miguel River in Maroa municipal district in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, with Géner García Molina, alias “John 40” as its ringleader. The objectives of the Front were financial and initially they exploited gold and coltan mines in the neighboring Guainía department, in Colombia. Between 2011 and 2012 they already had a large camp in Venezuela on the banks of the San Miguel River in Maroa municipal district, which they later moved to the Yavita - Maroa highway, where they established an airport. In their advance into the Venezuelan Amazon, they positioned themselves on the Casiquiare and Atabapo rivers, took control of the gold deposits of the Yapacana National Park, and penetrated the Sipapo, Ventuari and Manapiare river basins. In mid-2015, the front had about 150 troops, about fifty in Colombia, and the rest in Venezuela.

Following the signing of the Peace Agreements between the Colombian government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC, at the end of 2016, a group of guerrilla leaders from the Eastern Bloc turned their backs on the peace process, remained armed and continued with their illegal activities. The Acacio Medina Front became a dissident group of the FARC, with “John 40” as the highest-ranking commander and Miguel Díaz Sanmartin, better known as “Julián Chollo”, directing field operations.

After the signing of the Peace Accords in Colombia, a process of territorial rearrangements followed between the dissident groups of the FARC, the ELN and other criminal groups, both in Colombia and in Venezuela. In the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, a kind of consortium was created between the dissidents of the FARC and the ELN, in close political and economic cooperation with civil and military officials of the Venezuelan regime.

The FARC dissidents in Amazonas are scattered throughout the seven municipalities of the state and their presence is openly evident. Their penetration also extends to the state of Bolívar, where they are linked to the Orinoco Mining Arc government project, with positions in indigenous communities in Cedeño and Sucre municipal districts. Members of the indigenous communities have joined their ranks and or become sympathizers, especially young people attracted to the guerrillas by offers of payments and other benefits. The presence of the guerrillas has also brought conflicts with indigenous communities that reject their activities, as well as violent clashes and internal divisions between indigenous people who either support or oppose mining and the presence of armed groups within their territories.

On 29 August 2019, Iván Márquez, Jesús Santrich and a group of former FARC commanders who had accepted the Peace Accords, announced a return to arms with the creation of the “Second Marquetalia.” The movement presents itself as a revolutionary political-military organization that vindicates the former discourse and seeks to restructure the former ranks of the FARC. However,

<p>there are confrontations and disputes with the structures led by "Iván Mordisco" and "Gentil Duarte", who maintained important armed fronts in Colombia. Among the guerrilla leaders present at the event was "John 40," leader of the Acacio Medina Front, who joined the ranks of the new movement. The presence of the group in several Venezuelan states, including Amazonas and Bolívar, the Maduro government's support and the presence in Venezuela of several of its leaders have been reported. Among them, the aliases "Loco Iván," "Jesús Santrich," "El Paisa" and "Romaña" were killed in Venezuelan territory, and Márquez himself continues to take refuge in Venezuela.</p>	
<p>Economic activity Their activities focused on illegal gold and coltan mining, drug trafficking and extortion, especially through the collection of "vaccine" payments in exchange for protection or access to mining areas. In addition, the control of the routes of entry and exit of merchandise (drug trafficking, smuggling, mining) through the Colombian departments of Vichada and Guainía toward Venezuela and Brazil.</p>	
<p>Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members Frente Acacio Medina Acacio Medina Front:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Géner García Molina, alias "John 40," the highest-ranking commander - Miguel Díaz Sanmartín, alias "Julián Chollo", "Jota Jota". Directs field operations, chief in Yapacana <p>Tenth Front of the FARC dissidents Second Marquetalia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Luciano Marín Arango, alias "Ivan Marquez" - Géner García Molina, alias "John 40" 	
<p>Nearby or related mines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mines within Yapacana National Park: Cacique, La 40, La 44, La 50, Fibril, Jerusalem, Moyo, Maraya, among others - Aracamuni mine (Río Negro municipal district) - Mines along Guayapo and Cuao rivers (Janacome), Sipapo River basin (Autana municipal district) - Mines in the surroundings of La Esmeralda (Upper Orinoco municipal district) - Mines in Manapiare municipal district - Coltan mines (Atures and Cedeño municipal districts) - Mines in the lower and upper Caura River (Sucre municipal district): Yuruani, La Bullita, Fijiriña and San Pablo 	
Name of event	Date of event
The United Piaroas of the Sipapo Indigenous Organization (OIPUS) received an invitation signed by members of the FARC-EP, in which they convened a meeting with the indigenous communities to discuss their presence in Autana.	May 14th, 2013
60 heavily armed guerrillas assaulted and subdued 4 military personnel from the GNB River Command Post in the El Suspiro sector of San Fernando de Atabapo, state of Amazonas. The guerrillas destroyed the post, taking weapons, ammunition and mobile telephones. They gagged the soldiers and left a message for their superiors, stating that "they had to hand over the two boats with their respective cargoes, which had been seized from them earlier, as well as hand over the detainees."	February 13th, 2017
Assembly of Piara indigenous communities held at the Pendare community of the Sipapo River, Autana municipal district. ELN representatives and FARC dissidents participated. The indigenous people present demanded that they withdraw from their territory.	February 23rd, 2020
Arrival of a platoon of 70 FARC guerrillas who took over a tourist camp in Las Trincheras, on the lower Caura River. Months later they settled in the communities of El Playón and Las Pavas. They evicted the "syndicates" from the area and took over the Caura mines.	July, 2020

<p>Indigenous people from the communities around Yapacana National Park complained to Commander "Jota Jota" of the FARC's Acacio Medina Front about the repeated abuses against the communities. Led by the captain of the Piedra Blanca indigenous community, they demanded the departure of the guerrilla camp. Faced with the FARC's refusal to leave the area, the indigenous people decided to block river traffic and prevent the passage of supplies and machinery to the mines. The next day they seized a boat carrying large machinery intended for extracting gold at the "La 40" mine. This boat was being escorted by officials from the Mayor's Office of the Atabapo Municipal District, the Venezuelan Navy and members of the FARC.</p>	<p>September 5th and 6th, 2020</p>
<p>Four members of the FARC were killed in a confrontation with a combat unit of the FANB and the Bolivarian National Police, as part of "Operación Macizo Guayanés" (Operation Guiana Shield), in the La Cochinera sector, Angostura municipal district, in the state of Bolívar. Among those killed was Olivio Iván Merchán Gómez, alias "Crazy Iván", who was the head of the FARC wing most involved in drug trafficking, as well a military commander of the Second Marquetalia, led by Iván Márquez and Jesús Santrich.</p>	<p>November 14th, 2020</p>
<p>As part of "Operation Jiwi 2021," there was a confrontation between members of the Army's 52nd Jungle Infantry Brigade and a camp of the FARC dissidents, leaving six guerrilla soldiers dead. The events occurred in the Agua Linda sector, along the highway corridor 45 minutes north of Puerto Ayacucho. The air force also participated in the operation and there were bombings. Among the victims was a young Jiwi indigenous woman from the Coromoto community, on the southern end of the Puerto Ayacucho-Samariapo highway corridor.</p>	<p>5 February 2021</p>
<p>The United Piaroas of the Sipapo Indigenous Organization (OIPUS) received an invitation signed by members of the FARC-EP, in which they convened a meeting with the indigenous communities to discuss their presence in Autana.</p>	<p>February 5th, 2017</p>
<p>Alliances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ELN - High-level officials of the Nicolás Maduro regime and of various ranks of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces - National Government, State Governors, Mayors, REDI, ZODI, pro-regime political parties - Brazilian mafias: Família do Norte, Comando Vermelho and Primeiro Comando da Capital 	
<p>Enemy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GNB - Structures of the former FARC led by "Iván Mordisco" and "Gentil Duarte" 	
<p>Sources</p> <p>Segovia, 2018; Ebus, 2021; SOSOrinoco, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020e; Garzón, Cajiao, Tobo y Corredor, 2021; Segovia, Poliszuk y Ramírez, 2022; Ramírez, Poliszuk y Segovia, 2022; Kapé-Kapé, 2021; Barráez, 2017; Frontera Viva, 2020.</p>	

Garimpeiros (small-scale independent miners from Brazil)

State	Municipal District	Location
Amazonas	Upper Orinoco	Cerro (Mount) Delgado Chalbaud and Hashimú sector, headwaters of the Orinoco River Headwaters of the Ocamo, Metacuni and Padamo rivers.
Amazonas	Manapiare	Wasiri Branch, upper Ventuari River
Amazonas	Río Negro	Cerro (Mount) Aracamuni, Siapa River basin
<p>Presence and trajectory in the territory The presence of illegal miners from Brazil, known as <i>garimpeiros</i>, is a problem that has afflicted Venezuela's southern border strip adjacent to Brazil for more than three decades. It is a chronic and cyclical problem, with its ups and downs, but nevertheless permanent. The massive invasion of illegal miners into the Yanomami Indigenous Land of Brazil reached the figure of 20,000 <i>garimpeiros</i> in 2019. This invasion crosses the border from Brazil, and affects the indigenous communities of southern Venezuela. Under this nomenclature, it should be understood that there is a complex and intricate network of Brazilian miners, businessmen, merchants and politicians, which merits a special investigation.</p>		
<p>Economic activity Illegal mining and gold trafficking.</p>		
<p>Main focus of activity</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cerro (Mount) Aracamuni (Serranía La Neblina (Foggy Mountain Range) National Park, Siapa River basin), Río Negro municipal district, is the largest mining area in southern Amazonas, with more than 50 hectares of surface. Miners from Brazil and Colombia operate there with the support of the Colombian guerrillas (FARC dissidents), with the consent and cooperation of the Venezuelan military. 2. Upper basin or headwaters of the Orinoco River, Cerro (Mount) Delgado Chalbaud and Hashimú sector (Parima Tapirapecó National Park), Upper Orinoco municipal district. In mid-2020, Yanomami representatives denounced the presence of some 80 <i>garimpeiros</i> working with heavy machinery and generating an impact on the riverbeds. The <i>garimpeiros</i> enter the country in complicity with the National Guard from the Cerro Delgado Chalbaud post. It is the same sector where the Haximú massacre occurred in 1993. 3. Headwaters of the Alamo, Metacuni and Padamo rivers (Parima Tapirapecó National Park), Upper Orinoco municipal district. The presence of <i>garimpeiros</i> has been denounced for more than 10 years. Their operations receive air support from Boa Vista, Brazil and act in complicity with the Venezuelan military. In 2013, an alleged massacre perpetrated by <i>garimpeiros</i> in the Irotatheri community was reported. 4. Upper Ventuari River, Manapiare municipal district. According to the complaint lodged in August 2021 before the Ombudsman of the State of Amazonas State by organizations representing the Ye'kwana and Sánema indigenous communities, along the Wasiri Branch of the upper Ventuari River, there was an invasion of more than 400 heavily armed <i>garimpeiros</i> that were extracting ore using 30 machines. Indigenous leaders noted that they are being victims of targeted killings, and Sanema men, women and children are being enslaved. The <i>garimpeiros</i> operate with logistical support from planes and helicopters based in Brazil. 		
<p>Type of event The <i>garimpeiros</i>' actions have caused environmental damage and pollution resulting from the use of mercury, the introduction of diseases, the invasion of indigenous territories, the violation of the integrity of individuals and communities through the intentional use of violence, rape and sexual exploitation of girls, adolescents and women, labor exploitation and slavery, and the introduction of patterns of behavior alien to traditional ways of life, among other factors that threaten the life and integrity of indigenous communities.</p>		

Victim Yanomami, Sanema and Ye'kwana indigenous communities
Alliances FANB, ex FARC, ELN.
Sources SOSOrinoco 2020d; Ramírez, Poliszuk and Segovia, 2022; Poliszuk, Segovia and Ramírez, 2022.

Rodríguez Cueva Brothers

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Roscio	Guasipati	Guasipati
Presence and trajectory in the territory Hussni Nabil Rodríguez Cueva, nicknamed “El Menor” (The Youngest) for being the last of 5 brothers, all originally from the state of Yaracuy, had been mining, since 2001, a gold concession legally granted by the State in Guasipati, Roscio municipal District in the state of Bolívar. Starting in 2010, he had to arm himself to prevent criminal gangs from Ciudad Guayana and Ciudad Bolívar from entering and seizing the mines. In 2011, the concession was rendered null and void pursuant to Decree 8,413, which reserved gold exploration and exploitation activities to the State. The Rodríguez Cueva brothers continued to defend their mines until February 2018, when Angelis Rodríguez Cueva perished along with 17 other people in an operation carried out by members of the 51st Jungle Infantry Brigade. Following Angelis’s death, the family lost the mines, which were then taken over by the ELN.			
Economic activity Gold exploration and extraction.			
Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hussni Nabil Rodríguez Cueva, “El Menor” (The Youngest) - Anderson Rodríguez Cueva - Angelis Rodríguez Cueva 			
Nearby or related mines. Cicapra, Campanero, El Caolín, Florinda, El Cuadro, El Muerto, and El Muertico.			
Type of event		Date of event	
The killing of Hussni Nabil Rodríguez Cueva		Later part of 2014	
The killing of Anderson Rodríguez Cueva		February, 2017	
The killing of Angelis Rodríguez Cueva		February, 2018	
The killing of Hussni Nabil Rodríguez Cueva		Later part of 2014	
Enemy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Criminal gangs based in Ciudad Guayana and Ciudad Bolívar - 51st Jungle Infantry Brigade (Army) - ELN 			
Source Transparencia Venezuela, 2019.			

Organización R - OR (Organization R - OR)

also known as Fundación 3R - (3R Foundation)

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Sifontes	Sección Capital Sifontes	Tumeremo
Bolívar	El Callao		El Callao

Presence and trajectory in the territory
Eduardo José Natera Balboa, alias “Run” or “Crew-Cut Natera”, formed the “OR,” also known as the “3R,” from what was left of the mining gangs that had previously directed the activity in Tumeremo, and reinforced the group by recruiting deserters from the Venezuelan Army. The “OR” has three faces: one is that of a criminal gang, another that of a community organization and the other that of a political force. The group started in 2013, followed by its expansion in 2019.

The strategy of the Nicolás Maduro regime to control the mining chaos in Bolívar and guarantee profits for its corrupt elites was based on the armed attack by the Army, the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB), the police and the intelligence services, in coordination with Colombian guerrillas, to wrest control of gold mining from criminal gangs in the region. However, they have not been able to break the “OR,” who have skillfully combined armed force with social work and political action to position themselves as one of the main powers in the mining heartland of Bolívar. According to a high-ranking official of the state of Bolívar, “of all the gangs that operate in Bolívar, to me, the ‘OR’ is the most organized, because they have incredible logistical capacity and Colombian-style training.”

“Run” achieved the support of the Tumeremo community with social works channeled through the “3R Foundation,” which delivers food and toys to children, organizes sporting events and activities for young people, and improves local public services. The “OR” has also positioned itself as a defender of the miners and the communities that make a living from the activity, unlike most syndicates that exploit miners through terror. The backing of the local population served as an intelligence network for the group, giving it a vital advantage over the security forces and their criminal rivals.

In addition, the “OR” has a political façade through the Unidad Popular Venezolana (UPV) party (Venezuelan Peoples’ Unity), a member of the coalition of leftist parties related to the Chavista government. The “3R Foundation” also worked closely with the “Movement for Peace and Life,” a national government program that promotes sports and cultural activities in disadvantaged communities.

The conflict with Lieutenant Colonel Solís, who commanded the official armed forces at Fort Tarabay in Tumeremo, and had ties to the guerrillas and allied syndicates, came to a head in December 2019, when the Army took control of several local mines and blocked access routes. Local communities accused him of being responsible for extrajudicial executions and disappearances, and of collaborating with the guerrillas. For the “OR,” he became the main obstacle to their seizure of power in Tumeremo. The assassination of Solís in April 2020 not only facilitated the “OR’s” takeover of Tumeremo, but also marked the beginning of their expansion into new regions, as they moved north of Sifontes municipal district and entered neighboring El Callao municipal district. This advance soon earned them new enemies, as they entered territories controlled by El Tren de Guayana (The Guayana Retinue).

After months of fighting, in September 2021 the conflict ended with a statement from the “OR” declaring that they had reached a peace agreement with “The Guayana Retinue” and the government. According to the statement, the areas around the mines that had been under dispute would now be “zones of peace”, free of armed groups. Each group remains in control of their territories, but without disputes. The agreement was reached with the mediation of the Venezuelan Mining Corporation (CVM), the body in charge of administering the disputed mines. However, the CVM is frustrated, as many of the actors behind the mines, especially Army generals, do not fulfill their part of the bargain. The “OR,” by contrast, has built a reputation for being reliable partners, and able to keep the gold flowing.

Economic activities Collecting 15% of the gold production. The “OR” regulates the gold trade, including the price of gold.	
Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eduardo José Natera Balboa, alias “Run” or “El Pelón Natera” (Crew-Cut Natera). - César Alexander González, alias “Mágico González” (Magic González) - Alias “Daniel”, in charge of liaison between the “OR” and the “Movement for Peace and Life” 	
Nearby or related mines Belén y Tomi mines (in dispute with “The Guayana Retinue” and the Army), El Callao.	
Type of event	Date of event
“El Pelón” (Crew-Cut Man) is blamed for the death of “Gordo Bayón” (Fatman Bayón), assassinated in Caracas after leaving a meeting at Miraflores Presidential Palace.	June, 2014
Assassination of Lieutenant Colonel Ernesto Solís, who was commander of the “Division General Tomás de Heres” 512 th Jungle Infantry Battalion, located at Fort Tarabay, Tumeremo, and a sergeant who accompanied him, by members of “Organization R.”	April 6th, 2020
Conflict with “The Guayana Retinue,” soldiers from the 51 st Infantry Brigade and rural commandos from the National Guard, at the Belén mine. “The Guayana Retinue” and the military evicted the miners from the Atenas mine, and they were displaced toward towns near El Callao, the vast majority to the Belén mine. The displaced miners sought the support of “Organization R” to defend them from “The Guayana Retinue.”	August, 2021
“El Pelón” (Crew-Cut Man) is blamed for the death of “Gordo Bayón” (Fatman Bayón), assassinated in Caracas after leaving a meeting at Miraflores Presidential Palace.	June, 2014
Victims <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yorman Pedro Márquez Rodríguez, alias “Gordo Bayón” (Fat Man Bayón) - Lieutenant Colonel Ernesto Solís and a sergeant (Army) 	
Alliances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Movement for Peace and Life: governmental initiative that promotes culture and sports, directed by Alexander Vargas, former Minister of Sports - Venezuelan Mining Corporation (CVM) 	Enemies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Guayana Retinue - “El Talao’s” Gang - “El Toto” and “Zacarías” Gang - Army’s 51st Jungle Infantry Brigade - Rural Commandos of the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) - ELN
Sources Insight Crime, 2021c, Transparencia Venezuela, 2019.	

El Tren de Guayana - The Guayana Retinue

Gordo Bayón (Fat Man Bayón), Capitán (Captain), and Ronny Matón (Ronny the Killer)

State	Municipal District	Parish	Location
Bolívar	Caroní		Ciudad Guayana
Bolívar	Roscio	Sección Capital Roscio	Guasipati
Bolívar	Sifontes	Sección Capital Sifontes	Tumeremo
Bolívar	El Callao		El Callao

Presence and trajectory in the territory

Yorman Pedro Márquez Rodríguez, better known as "Gordo Bayón" and Phanor Vladimir Sanclemente Ojeda, nicknamed "Capitán", appeared as leaders of "The Guayana Retinue," one of the gangs that supposedly received the most support from the government of the state of Bolívar, during the administration of Division General Francisco Rangel Gómez. The duo is accused of dozens of crimes that have occurred since 2009 in the Vista al Sol parish of Ciudad Guayana, and a triple homicide perpetrated in February 2011. "The Captain," "Gordo Bayón" and Rony Yackson Colomé Cruz, alias "Ronny Matón" (Killer Ronny), right-hand man of "Captain," were accused of being the executors of the crime, together with 2 complicit municipal police officers. They went to prison, but were quickly released under precautionary measures. Despite his criminal activity, "Gordo Bayón" ventured into the labor syndicates of the basic industries of Ciudad Guayana, and entered the SIDOR payroll in 2012.

By 2013 the gang had a large logistical and combat organization financed by income from its criminal activities in San Félix and Puerto Ordaz, such as selling drugs and weapons, and stealing cars and robbing banks. These movements were carried out under the sponsorship of officials of high, medium and low ranks. The regional government supplied them with weapons and ammunition, and assigned them areas of responsibility in the low-income neighborhoods. As a result of this government support, "Gordo Bayón" and "The Capitan" managed to acquire important mines: Las Vainitas, in Guasipati; and eight more in El Callao.

"Gordo Bayón" was assassinated in Caracas in June 2014, after leaving a meeting at Miraflores Presidential Palace. After the death of "Gordo Bayón," command was passed on to "The Captain." The latter led the gang for the next four years, until October 2018, when he was shot down by officer of the General Office of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) in the state of Miranda state. He was in demand after the "Manos de Metal" operation, carried out in 2018 against the mafias dedicated to the illegal extraction and marketing of gold. Upon his death, alias "Ronny Matón" (Ronny the Killer) was left in charge. Although "Gordo Bayón" and "The Capitan" took over a large part of the El Callao mines, they were unable to have full control of the municipal district because they encountered resistance from 3 other organizations distributed throughout the locality: "El Toto" in the El Perú sector; "El Chingo" in Caratal and Remington; and Angelo and "Ruqui" at La Ramona.

In August 2021, the alliance between the current commander of the 51st Infantry Brigade, Brigadier General Rivas Acosta, and "The Guayana Retinue" was denounced. The Army's 51st Infantry Brigade was reportedly facilitating the use of its officers by the criminal organization, which was allegedly paying \$1,000 a month to each soldier. The purpose of the agreement was to remove the indigenous people from the towns near the gold mines in the Orinoco Mining Arc. This happened in the Atenas mine, which was cleared of miners and came under the control of "The Guayana Retinue." Between 40,000 and 60,000 liters of fuel, satellite links and other supplies also arrived at the mine. In other words, the Army advanced in the area to displace the miners and hand over the mine to this other group. The displaced miners arrived in the towns near El Callao, the vast majority at the Belén mine. Behind the displaced miners also came the criminals from "The Guayana Retinue," who, supported by the soldiers of the 51st Infantry Brigade, managed to displace the miners again, who then sought the support of the "R Organization" and began the confrontations.

Economic activity Illegal mining, contract murders, extortion, trafficking and sale of drugs, weapons and strategic materials, theft and vehicle theft, bank robberies, labor syndicate terrorism.	
Name(s) of leaders(s) and other members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jorman Pedro Márquez, alias “Gordo Bayón” (Fatman Bayón) - Phanor Vladimir Sanclemente Ojeda, alias “Capitán” (Captain) - Ronny Yackson Colomé Cruz, alias “Ronny Matón” (Ronny the Killer) 	
Nearby or related mines Las Vainitas and Cicapra mines, in Guasipati; and eight mines near El Callao; the Belén, Tomi, Atenas, and Cicapra mines.	
Type of event	Date of event
Triple homicide at Vista Alegre, Ciudad Guayana	February 29th, 2011
Confrontations with “El Toto”, “El Chingo”, and Angelo and “Ruqui’s” gangs for control of the mines at El Callao	2013 - 2014
“Gordo Bayón” was assassinated in Caracas after leaving a meeting at Miraflores Presidential Palace	June 2nd, 2014
Phanor Vladimir Sanclemente Ojeda, alias “Capitán”, died in a presumed confrontation with officers of the General Office of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) at Río Chico, Barlovento, state of Miranda	October, 2018
Displacement of miners from the Atenas mine, with the help of the 51 st Army Infantry Brigade. Confrontation with the displaced miners and “Organization R,” who had defended them at the Belén mine.	August, 2021
Victim José Jaime, Richard Carvajal and Maikel Sánchez (triple homicide).	
Alliances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government of the State of Bolívar - Army’s 51st Jungle Infantry Brigade - “El Talao’s” Gang - “El Toto” and “Zacarias’s” Gang 	Enemy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Organization R” - “El Toto’s” Gang - “El Chingo’s” Gang - Angelo and “Ruqui’s” Gang - General Office of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM)
Sources Ostos, 2021; EBD/Redacción, 2021; Transparencia Venezuela, 2019.	



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