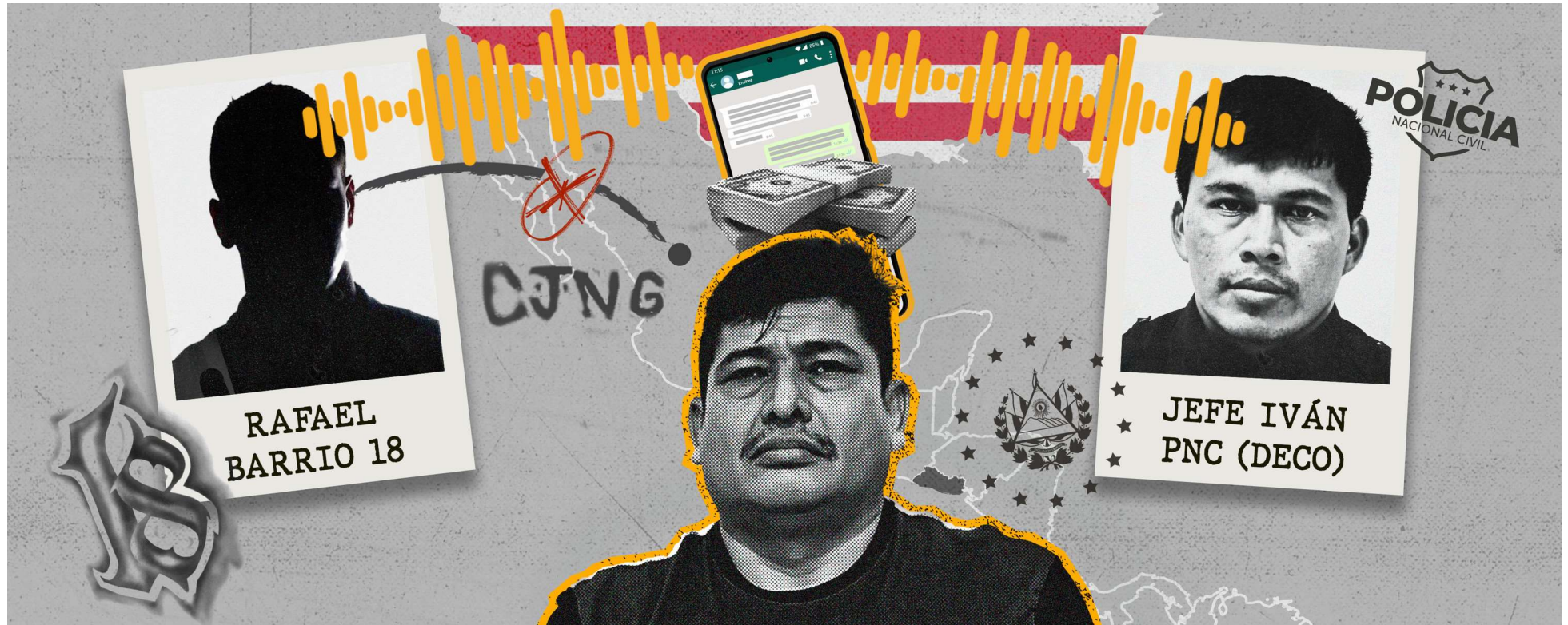


Salvadoran Government Conspired with Gang Leader to Recapture ‘Crook’ through Jalisco Cartel



Daniel Reyes and Alex Santos

In 2023, two years after illegally releasing Élmer Canales Rivera, the MS-13 leader known as “Crook”, the government of El Salvador launched a desperate bid to re-capture him before the February 2024 elections. According to audio recordings, messages, and testimony obtained by El Faro, the administration of President Nayib Bukele was willing to pay one million U.S. dollars to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) in exchange for abducting the gang leader and turning him over —preferably alive— at a secret location.

The Salvadoran government first put Chief Inspector Raúl Eduardo Reyes Escuintla, head of the Elite Division against Organized Crime (DECO), in charge of recruiting known human traffickers to the task. The coyotes failed, but one of them introduced Escuintla to someone who could take on the job: a senior leader of the Sureño faction of the 18th Street gang: Rafael Eduardo J., alias “Rafa”, a fugitive since 2016.

Rafa had left El Salvador in 2022, [amid the government offensive against the gangs](#), and was living discreetly on the outskirts of a Central American capital. As a fugitive, he risked contact with the police for something the Bukele administration had that he wanted: His sister had been captured, like thousands of others, under the state of exception.

El Faro obtained proof of how, in search of an alleged tradeoff, Rafa negotiated with Escuintla, who identified himself in the talks under the codename “Iván”, for ten months. Their arrangement, which included the illegal release of Rafa’s sister and promises of money, fell apart when Crook was arrested in Mexico last November and placed in U.S. custody.



Élmer Canales Rivera, Crook, reads the newspaper next to fellow MS-13 leaders Saúl Antonio Turcios and Tiberio Ramírez (left), after a press conference related to The Truce on May 18, 2013. Photo José Cabezas/AFP

Crook, one of the most senior leaders of the Mara Salvatrucha, had been [secretly freed by the Salvadoran government](#) at the end of 2021, as part of Bukele's pacts with the three main gangs in El Salvador, despite still owing four decades in prison and facing a U.S. extradition request.

Journalistic and judicial investigations revealed details about that operation. El Faro confirmed that Crook was freed in November 2021, [transferred to a luxury apartment](#) in San Salvador, and later [driven to Guatemala by Carlos Marroquín](#), a mid-level cabinet member and lead government negotiator with the gangs. Furthermore, [U.S. judicial filings](#) assert that, after freeing Crook, the Salvadoran government gave him a firearm.

Crook, currently awaiting trial in a Brooklyn jail, is living proof of Bukele's accords with the gangs, which the government denies. His re-capture would have allowed Salvadoran authorities to try denying that he was freed, and by extension deny the pact.

On Friday, El Faro called Inspector Escuintla on the same official phone line where he conducted part of his negotiations with Rafa. The call was brief:

"Hello. Am I speaking with Jefe Iván?"

"At your service," he responded.

"Hello, Inspector Escuintla, I'm calling on behalf of a group of journalists from El Faro."

"It's a pleasure. At your service."

"This number has been used to communicate in an operation with a gang member from the 18th Street Sureños. We understand that you communicated with him. We have some of the conversations that you held, regarding an operation to recapture Crook, and we would like to hear your version of what happened, and to know if it was an operation that you decided to carry out, or one that you were assigned."

"Who am I speaking with?" Escuintla asked.

When the El Faro reporter identified himself by name, the police officer hung up. He did not answer subsequent calls. El Faro also called two press officials of the Salvadoran National Civil Police: The first one indicated that David Cruz handled communications for DECO. Cruz immediately hung up the phone when reached for comment.

The press secretary of the Presidency was also contacted but, as is common practice, he did not answer a call or a text message made to his phone.

To any lengths

In the first week of March 2023 Rafa called Inspector Escuintla and asserted that he, as opposed to the human traffickers, had the necessary contacts to find Crook, but would only activate them once his sister was free.

Escuintla told him: "I have information for you, and from you I want information that the boss was asking for," he said. "First, concerning what most interests you, your relative: He [the boss] has no issue with creating the conditions for her to go home."

El Faro obtained the full audio of that call, recorded by Rafa, as well as dozens of screenshots showing Escuintla offering money to him personally, to the 18th Street Sureños, and the Jalisco Cartel. The images also prove that the Salvadoran senior police officer gave the gangster sensitive intelligence information, like the movements of Crook.

These communications do not identify Escuintla by name and rank of inspector, but rather by his codename in the police force: Iván. Of the two Salvadoran telephone numbers he used, El Faro traced one —7070-4036— to him. Seven internal police documents explicitly state that the number was assigned to Escuintla as head of DECO. At this outlet’s request, a high-ranking police official also verified in their own phone that the number officially belonged to Escuintla. Two members of DECO and a prosecutor who has worked with the unit also identified the inspector as using the codename “Iván” for over a decade.

A week after that call, Rafa’s sister was secretly transferred from Apanteos Prison to a safehouse in San Salvador, where she stayed for over a month. She was then driven back to Apanteos for a few hours to be formally notified —without standing trial— of her release.

The release of Rafa’s sister shows that the negotiation was not an individual action of Inspector Escuintla, nor contained to the Salvadoran police. No police officer, not even a senior official like the head of the Elite Division against Organized Crime, has the power to free an incarcerated person nor “create the conditions” for release. It could only have happened with institutional support from the Bureau of Prisons, a dependency of the Ministry of Security.

The inspector told Rafa that a higher authority approved each step of the operation, referring only to the person as “*el patrón*”, “*el mandamás*” (the top dog), or “*el hombre*”.

Rafa’s sister officially recovered her freedom on April 22, 2023, with the obligation of appearing in court every two weeks and checking in every other day with another police officer, whom she only knows as Sergeant “Roger”, and whose phone number also appears in police records as assigned to DECO. El Faro confirmed that she fled El Salvador.

Once the requirement was met, Rafa proposed to coordinate with the Jalisco Cartel to abduct Crook, if the police would only tell him Crook’s whereabouts. The cartel, Rafa said, would not work for free, and neither would he or his gang. He also requested funds to cover travel and communication. Escuintla responded over the phone that this would be no problem. Rafa claims that they agreed to a payment of \$6,000 USD, but that \$4,000 in cash were ultimately delivered through his family.

[El Faro Audio · 'He has no issue with creating the conditions for your relative to go home'](#)

The CJNG is one of the largest drug trafficking organizations in the world. Its rivalry with the Sinaloa Cartel for control of routes in Mexico has left tens of thousands of people dead. In 2015, the U.S. Justice Department designated Jalisco as one of the top-five most dangerous transnational criminal organizations in the world, responsible for moving tons of cocaine, methamphetamines, and fentanyl.

Rafa told the police inspector that he would use the travel funds to weave a web of contacts in Mexico between his gang and representatives of the cartel. They even agreed on a cover story: Rafa would say he was reaching out on behalf of a businessman supposedly aggrieved by Crook and looking for revenge, so the cartel would not be informed that Rafa was negotiating with the Salvadoran government.

But Rafa put off any direct communication between Escuintla and the drug traffickers. In an interview with El Faro, he said he saw the government's "desperation" to re-capture Crook and for that reason he told the inspector what he wanted to hear.

He was scamming the Bukele administration.

Who is Rafa

Rafael Eduardo J., 40 years old, has been a gang member since 1999, years before 18th Street fractured in two in El Salvador. He has five tattoos with the number 18 on his torso and back, and a scar on his chest from a bullet wound. "Rafa" is both his nickname and the *nom de guerre* that he chose when he joined the gang.

El Faro first spoke with him in 2012, when the agreement between the government of Mauricio Funes and the gangs, known as "The Truce", was in full swing. He was one of two non-incarcerated representatives of the 18th Street Sureños, and on several occasions spoke on behalf of all three gangs involved in the negotiation. Of the six non-incarcerated representatives of the gangs during the Truce, three are dead and another two are in prison. Rafa is the only one to stay alive and out of prison.

He also participated in negotiations with the FMLN and Arena prior to the 2014 presidential election, and received money from both political parties.

In 2016 Rafa was accused of extortion alongside the rest of the gang members who headed the Truce, as well as the government negotiator, Raúl Mijangos. Since then, he has been on the run. That is why he did not directly participate in the secret talks with the Bukele administration in the last few years, but as a leader of the criminal structure he was privy to some information on their agreements. In a telephone call with El Faro in 2021, he claimed that he was "surprised" at the way that Bukele kept his promises to the gangs.



If that guy had stayed,

Rafael Eduardo J., alias 'Rafa', in a still from the 2007 documentary 'La Vida Loca', directed by Franco-Spanish photojournalist Cristian Poveda. Over the following years Rafa became one of the main leaders of the 18th Street Sureños gang in El Salvador. He has been a fugitive from justice since 2016.

When in March 2022 the government enacted the still-ongoing state of exception, Rafa left the country with his wife and daughter for another Central American country, where they set up a pupusería, and he severed almost all contact with his gang. He says he has become increasingly convinced that “the *ranflas* [senior gang leaders] negotiated with the [Bukele] government for their own benefits, and behind the backs of the street, and I don’t want anything to do with that.”

He stayed quiet until Jan. 30, 2023, when his sister, whose name El Faro agreed to omit, was detained despite never having belonged to a gang. She is from Santa Ana, is 39 years old, has three children, and used to sell tortillas. She was accustomed to the police harassment stemming from the fact that her brother was a national leader of the Sureños. Rafa says he reached out to government contacts with offers in exchange for her release, but to no avail. Then, a childhood friend, Kevin Genovés, a human trafficker, told him that government representatives had contacted him for help in solving the Crook affair.

In the ensuing months, Rafa told Escuintla that 18th Street had an organization in Mexico, that he had contact with the Jalisco Cartel through a clique newly established there, and that he had traveled to that country to build “trust” with the cartel and prepare the operation. Last, he told the inspector that CJNG would charge one million dollars, the Sureños would take 250,000, and he would get 50,000.

But Rafa never involved his gang, the new clique in Mexico never existed, he never contacted the CJNG, he did not go to Mexico, and there were no drug traffickers haggling over the price of Crook’s kidnapping. What he did do, in August 2023, was contact El Faro and U.S. authorities.

Coyotes search for Crook

Kevin Armando Genovés Hernández, Rafa’s childhood friend, has been arrested for human trafficking, threats, and assault. Salvadoran Police profiled him in 2017 as a member of the Sureños, the same gang that Rafa led for years, but Rafa says that Genovés was never a member. Three Salvadoran judicial documents obtained by El Faro present him as a coyote: In one of them, from 2020, a mother claimed to have paid him \$9,800 to take her underage son to the United States.

In early 2023 Genovés told Rafa about his meetings with detectives who asked for help to capture Crook. The police understood that anyone moving undocumented migrants to the United States would have contacts in Mexican criminal groups, which human traffickers call “having a line”. According to Genovés, that is why the police contacted him and José Narciso Ramírez Ventura, a former mayor from Ahuachapán who goes by Chicho, and who was condemned last year to three decades in prison for human trafficking.

According to Genovés, the conviction of Chicho—who is supposed to be in prison until 2053—was no impediment to the former mayor’s in-person participation in the meetings with the police. El Faro has not confirmed this account, but Genovés said so publicly on his social media after cutting off his negotiation with the Bukele government.

He also asserts that Jorge Vega Knight, indicted in 2018 for money laundering and affiliation to MS-13, a group classified in El Salvador as a terrorist organization, also took part in those meetings. Vega Knight was absolved in February 2021 [with Rodolfo Delgado as his lawyer](#). Two months later, Delgado was named Attorney General by Bukele, through his ruling-party legislators. He then dismantled the anti-mafia unit that had investigated Bukele’s negotiations with gangs, and raided the offices of those prosecutors, who are now in exile.

POLICIA NACIONAL CIVIL
DEPARTAMENTO DE INTEGRACION DEL TALENTO HUMANO
NOMINA DE TALENTO HUMANO CON CARGOS DE JEFATURAS AL 13/05/2022

46			DIVISION DE ANTINARCOTICOS	JEFE DE GRUPO	Cabo		ACTIVO
47			DIVISION DE ANTINARCOTICOS	JEFE SECCION ANTINARCOTICOS	Agente		ACTIVO
48			DIVISION DE ANTINARCOTICOS	JEFE SECCION ANTINARCOTICOS	Agente		ACTIVO
49			DIVISION DE ANTINARCOTICOS	JEFA SECCION DILIGENCIAS	Técnico Profesional V		ACTIVO
50			DIVISION DE ANTINARCOTICOS	INVESTIGADORA DISCIPLINARIA	Jefe Departamento Antinarcóticos		ACTIVO
51			DIVISION DE ANTINARCOTICOS	JEFE SECCION DE PERSONAL - PERITO	Técnico VI		ACTIVO
52		REYES ESCUINTLA, RAUL EDUARDO	DIVISION ELITE CONTRA EL CRIMEN ORGANIZADO	JEFE DIVISION ELITE CONTRA EL CRIMEN ORGANIZADO	Inspector Jefe	70704036	ACTIVO
53			DIVISION ELITE CONTRA EL CRIMEN ORGANIZADO	JEFE GRUPO DE INVESTIGACIONES	Subinspector		ACTIVO
54			DIVISION ELITE CONTRA EL CRIMEN ORGANIZADO	JEFE GRUPO DE INVESTIGACIONES	Sargento		PERSONAL FALTANDO
55			DIVISION ELITE CONTRA EL CRIMEN ORGANIZADO	JEFE DE GRUPO TECNICAS OPERATIVAS	Agente		PERSONAL FALTANDO
56			DIVISION ELITE CONTRA EL CRIMEN ORGANIZADO	JEFA SEC. INVESTIGACION DISCIPLINARIA - DECO	Agente		ACTIVO
57			DIVISION CENTRAL DE INVESTIGACIONES	JEFE DIVISION CENTRAL DE INVESTIGACIONES	Subcomisionado		ACTIVO

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A document obtained by Guacamaya Leaks confirms that the Salvadoran phone number 7070-4036 is assigned to Inspector Reyes Escuintla, the head officer of DECO.

By November 2023, Inspector Escuintla was negotiating with Rafa. Genovés then posted a video on his Facebook account in which he recounted his failed mission to recover Crook and complained that Salvadoran authorities were pursuing him anew.

“I can show convincing proof, the real voice of Romeo Pompilio, deputy director of investigations at the National Civil Police; and of Escuintla, the head of DECO. Remember, I recorded every last thing we discussed” he said in the recording, addressing the policemen:

“When we were at Burger King, remember? You only told me: ‘Here are 500 dollars,’ and the man who gave it to me was Jorge Vega Knight, the MS-13 gangster who they are making that deal with. I have the pictures from that park where you took the sister of that gang member, in order to set her free. I have it. The *palabrero* of the 18 at the national level [Rafa] asked you for three things: first, to get his sister out of jail, and you gave her over. He asked for 6,000 dollars for expenses. You gave him the money, too. When we asked what had happened to us, and why you didn’t give us what you promised, you only gave us a whole lot of ‘buts,’” he said, and concluded:

“I’m gonna publish the proof, the photos, the videos of the meetings... of you trying to bring Crook back, because you fear that Crook will talk in the United States, and drag down this whole government.”

Police arrested Genovés last December. El Faro could not locate him.

The phone call

El Faro interviewed Rafa in person on five occasions since August 2023. He claims he had his first phone call with Inspector Escuintla, whom he references only as “the boss Iván,” in mid-February 2023. He did not record it, but he recalls that he offered to ask drug traffickers for help locating Crook and turning him over to Salvadoran authorities, in exchange for money and for his sister’s release. At the time, he believed that “Crook was with [the] Sinaloa [cartel],” due to the Mara Salvatrucha’s ties to that organization.

Rafa did record a subsequent phone call with the police inspector —whose contact he saved in his phone as “Don Iván Jefe”— in March 2023. In the audio recording, obtained by El Faro, the phone rings three times before a man answers:

“Hey, boss man,” says Rafa.

“Hold on, let me get set up,” responds Escuintla.

“We’re all set. The device hadn’t arrived, so I hadn’t gotten any signal.”

“Things are moving very slowly, and at this rate 2024 will be here, and we want to speed things up,” says the officer. “Cutting to the chase, I have three things to tell you, and I want to hear two from you — things the patrón is asking me for. First, concerning what most interests you, your relative: He has no issue with creating the conditions for her to go home.

Rafa responds that he understands how delicate the topic is, and that if he betrays the Salvadoran government he expects consequences: “Even my [relatives] who haven’t been born yet are in my hands.” “That’s right,” the officer responds. Rafa asks if “there is a set schedule” for his sister’s release. “It depends on the following,” says Escuintla, and explains that Rafa’s proposal that his sister mediate the conversations was turned down: “[That would be] like trying to get to the moon on foot; you won’t even make it to the border.”

“Communication must be direct and more fluid,” the head of DECO underscores.

[El Faro Audio](#) · 'They're asking me for you to tell us what proof of your loyalty you can give us'

Rafa asks if, in that case, “you don’t see the need for her to get out in the short term,” and the police officer responds that “she can be home next week.” After a few minutes, Rafa adds: “If you’re going to put [an electronic] bracelet on her, give her three. Whatever the hell you want.” The gang member notes that he must be sure to “clone telephones,” and Escuintla interjects:

“The other thing is: The travel funds are no problem. You tell us how to get them to you, and there is no problem.” He continues: “We’re giving you your family member, we’re giving you mobility. They’re asking me for you to tell us what proof of your loyalty you can give us.”

“What do you want?”

“You tell us what you have.”

Rafa then launches into a monologue to explain that he has begun a “light” search for Crook and that he understands that if “the guys with the white skin [U.S. authorities, who were also looking for Crook] realize we have gotten in the way of any shit, they’ll tear us apart.” “I’ll play all my cards for you guys to get what you want. It’ll happen, regardless of how,” the gang member promises:

“Apart from the J [Jalisco Cartel] I was talking with our own people [the Sureños] from the area where I am, and where he [Crook] moves, too. I’m gonna set up an operation of all sorts possible, with everything from the lowest in society, so that you can get that son of a bitch, my friend,” Rafa says. “Whatever it takes. I can’t say whether it’ll be tomorrow or the next day, because there will be things that don’t depend on me. And, like I said before: If things get complicated and he dies in the attempt, you should understand, but you’ll have everything you need to confirm that it’s him. The mission is as you guys want it. Once I have the travel funds and my sister is out, I’ll start sitting down with these people. It’s already agreed upon with you guys that if I die at the beginning of this shit, our word is bond, right? No touching my family, and my girl can come lay flowers for me, right?”

Rafa then references Inspector Escuintla’s boss:

“Tell the *hombre* that I don’t have the resources or capacity to pull my last relative out of there [El Salvador] and that I know they would be the one to pay the price.”

When El Faro asked Rafa who “el hombre” is, he replied: “He could be nobody less than the head of the Police, the minister of security, or the president.”

[El Faro Audio · 'I'm gonna set up an operation of all sorts possible, so that you can get that son of a bitch'](#)

In the recording, the officer insists on asking the gang member to make a gesture of good faith to the Salvadoran government:

“A little arms stash, of the kind that you won’t need anymore, any irons, some *fulano* [gang member] who for reasons of destiny is no longer needed, from your own line?”

Rafa dodges for almost ten minutes: He mentions a car, but doesn’t give the license plate; he throws out a nickname, but nothing concrete; he says they perhaps have some weapons, but he no longer gets into it, “to avoid anything foolish”. He promises to gather information to share the next day.

“The *mandamás* needs to know how much time we’re talking about to wrap this thing up [Crook’s arrest],” says Escuintla. Rafa replies:

“As soon as I have the resources, my friend. I went to bat for each of the last ones [Salvadoran administrations], without sleeping. I would get up at 4am and sleep at one in the morning, getting things done for each one of them, from [former president] Tony Saca through the last before this one [Salvador Sánchez Cerén], and now, for this one. If you give me my sister, no sir. I will be committed to whatever the hell you want. Never in my life have I done anything against them [Bukele and allies], or done anything to get in their way. Look, when Fuerza sought me out [the party Fuerza Solidaria], you can ask them about when they came looking for me. ‘If it’s to mess with the man [Bukele],’ I said, ‘I’ll get up now and leave.’ ‘No,’ they told me, ‘we’re hand-in-hand with him.’ ‘Ahh, well then I’ll sit, and let’s talk.’ That’s how crazy I’ve been in life, my friend.”

Escuintla responded: “We’ll set up a time to sort out the travel funds. And do we know, cursorily, where this guy [Crook] is?”

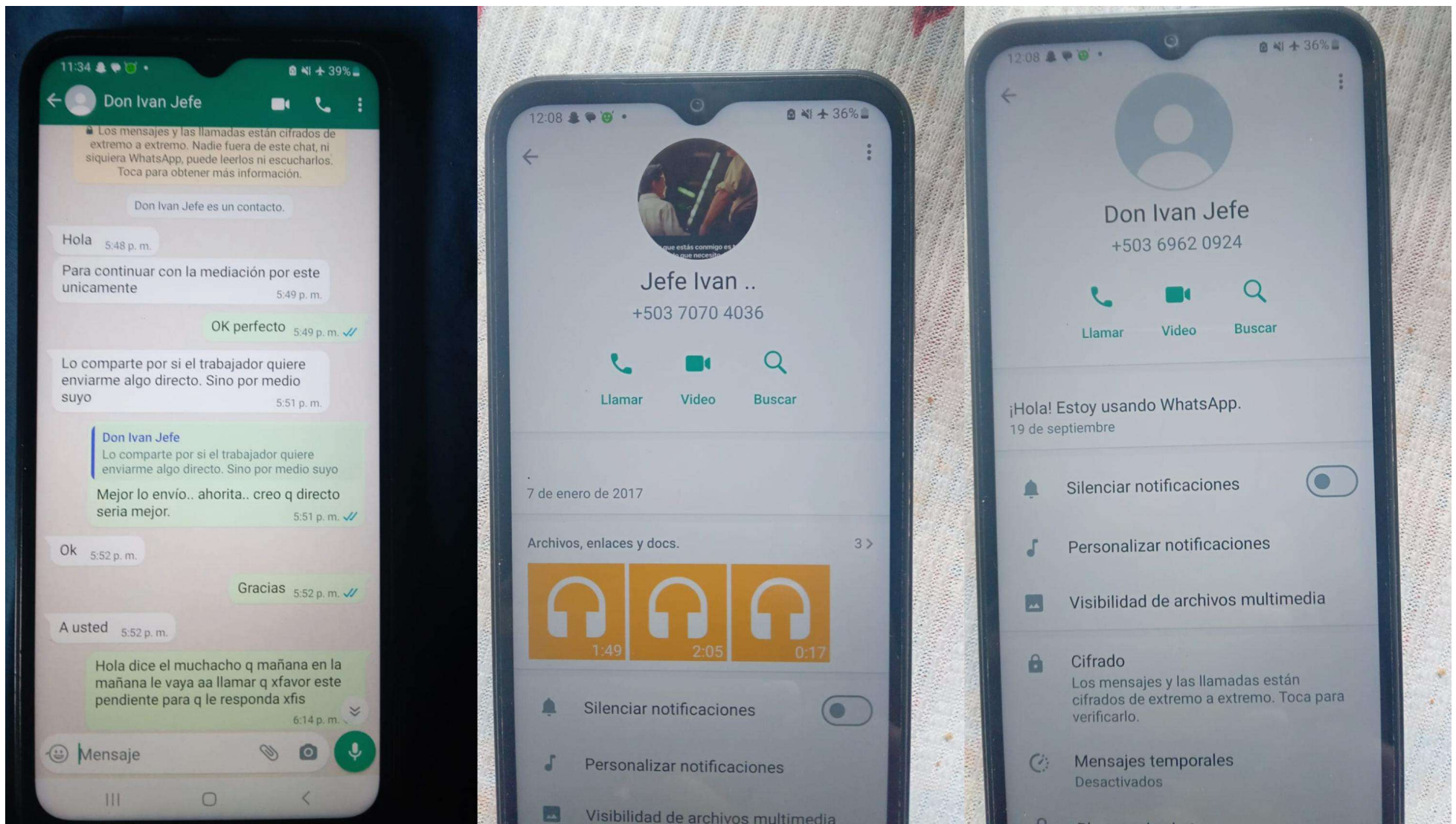
“Look, there have been conversations, man, like I said. There have been talks, and talks make things come to light. But leave me to it, man, don’t put me at risk, because if you pressure me I’ll run things, and I can’t do it that way. I have to be smooth, and with the operations of the people who will name their price. By the time I tell you what their price is, it’s possible that those sons of bitches [CJNG] will already have him. Don’t sweat it. I just have to set the stage right and build the right trust. You feel me?”

“Okay, perfect. We’re all set, then,” the police officer says, concluding the 21-minute conversation.

The number that Rafa called was 6962-0924, an alternative personal number for Escuintla. After the man’s sister was freed in April, 2023, she communicated with the officer by both numbers over WhatsApp, guarding this number as “Don Iván Jefe” and his official line, registered to DECO, as “Iván Jefe.” Sometime before last October, the inspector wrote her a message from his personal line: “Hello. To continue with the mediation, on this [phone] only. Share it in case the worker [Rafa] wants to send me something directly.” From then on, the agent and Rafa’s sister only communicated via that phone number.

El Faro obtained dozens of screenshots of their conversations.

On October 1, the inspector shared intelligence with Rafa’s sister: “My uncle [Crook] was in Miraflores, Chiapas; but seeing as he is restless, he went to Guadalajara. He’s there now. Tell the muchacho [Rafa] that.” “I’ll send it to him now,” the sister replied.



Picture of some of the messages that Inspector Escuintla sent to Rafa's sister after she was released, and the numbers from which he maintained communication with her. The one in the center is the official number assigned to the Elite Division Against Organized Crime of the Salvadoran National Civil Police.

“Tell him that a friend of the owner of the *canales* [Crook] is on our payroll,” Escuintla wrote. “Tell him not to worry, everything will be fine.” When she asked him to be more precise, the agent answered that he knew nothing more, that “Guadalajara isn’t that big.” Crook “goes to bars or beer gardens at night; he likes to visit the nightclub; he looks exactly the same, you can’t miss him; he wears jeans and sweaters with sleeves down to his fists.”

On September 20, while negotiating the supposed price to pay the cartel to retrieve Crook, Escuintla messaged her: “Ask how much more to add for the Sur and for him.” “Ok,” she wrote back.

Five days later, she insisted that he answer whether the government would pay the fees because “opportunities are being missed to put people in the right places.” The inspector replied: “Those terms are accepted. No more, no less.” According to Rafa, the senior police officer had agreed to pay one million dollars to the Jalisco Cartel, 250,000 to the 18th Street Sureños, and 50,000 for him.

Government phone lines

Raúl Eduardo Reyes Escuintla, “Iván”, built a career in DECO since the late nineties. As a wave of kidnappings hit El Salvador in 1999 and 2000, he surveilled kidnappers through extensive cooperation with the Elite Unit against Organized Crime, a unit of the Attorney General’s Office then directed by Gustavo Villatoro, Bukele’s current minister of security.

In 2004, Villatoro left the unit to direct the customs authority under the government of Antonio Saca. Rodolfo Delgado, the current AG, took his place as head of the Elite Unit against Organized Crime.

Among the multiple documents that prove that the number 7070-4036 is assigned to Chief Inspector Escuintla are five emails and seven internal police documents obtained by El Faro through Guacamaya Leaks. In one of the emails, dated May 16, 2022, an administrative official sent the Police Attaché in Washington an Excel file titled, “Payroll of human talent with senior positions,” containing 299 phone numbers including his.

The number by which Rafa’s sister communicated with Sergeant “Roger” after her release, 7074-5442, also belongs to the state. The person assigned this number does not appear in the Guacamaya Leaks, but the trove of internal police files does contain an Excel sheet shared between administrative offices in February 2022, listing the number among 30 phone lines assigned to DECO, the unit led by Escuintla.

El Faro reached Sergeant Roger for comment at this number. As soon as the reporter identified himself, the police officer hung up.

As time passed, Sergeant Roger’s watch over Rafa’s sister became more routine. Over this phone number they would wish each other good morning and “blessings” like friends, and she was always on time for her appearances in court.

Then, last November 8, Crook was captured in Chiapas, Mexico and put in FBI custody. That day, Rafa turned to his contacts in El Salvador to get her sister out of the country by a blind spot along the border. She never wrote to Roger again. El Faro learned that, as of that same month, Rafa and his sister are under the protection of U.S. authorities.