



Mula was an important interlocutor between the MS13 and Mexican Mafia in Tijuana, Mexico.

News MS13

'Mula': The Bridge Between MS13 and Mexican Mafia in Tijuana, Mexico

by Carlos Garcia
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One afternoon in 1993, Nelson Alexander Flores Pacheco, better known as “Mula” within the MS13, took his knife, stabbed a taxi driver, and kicked his face repeatedly.

Just 22 years old and utterly reckless, he had assaulted the driver while intoxicated. After being arrested by Nevada police, he identified himself as a soldier with the Mara Salvatrucha (**MS13**). Nobody there had heard of the gang.

Neither jail nor time cured Flores of his violent ways. Two years later, he was arrested in Nevada for participating in a drive-by shooting targeting rival gang members. He spent five years in prison and was deported back to El Salvador upon release.

This was a homecoming of sorts for Flores. He was born in El Salvador's western department of Santa Ana on June 26, 1971, a few years before the country's civil war (1979-1992) began. The conflict marked Flores for life: Two of his sisters were killed during a guerrilla attack on a bus, while his mother was killed after being caught in the crossfire, he would later tell an Ohio court.

During his childhood, he helped his father in the fields after attending school, until the war forced him to flee to Reno, Nevada in 1987. In Reno, he lived with his brother and began forging a reputation for violence before joining the Park View Locos clique of the MS13 in Los Angeles in the early 1990s.

After serving his sentence in Nevada and being repatriated, Flores returned to the United States through Tijuana. Because it is so close to Los Angeles, the Mexican border city had become a destination for many gang members seeking to return to the United States after being deported.

SEE ALSO: [The Birth of the MS13's Mexico Program](#)

But Flores settled in Columbus, Ohio. There he started creating a new MS13 clique, the first in the entire state. It was the early 2000s.

"There was no clique," said "Checa," a former gang member, or *homeboy*, as they like to call themselves. "There were only three of us ... and I actually went to find one of the old-timers. They called him 'Mula.'"

Checa had gang experience on the streets of El Salvador, and Flores had spent some years in Nevada's prison system, so the two men had the chops to create their own clique, which they named the Columbus Criminals Locos after their adopted city. The MS13's expansion into Ohio broadened the gang's presence in the United States and, consequently, the range of crimes they committed. Part of their profits was sent to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Like many gang members, Flores had a double life. He had a day job, often using fake documents to obscure his past. And he kept to himself. He was a "polite, respectful, and punctual employee," according to a former contractor interviewed by **[The Los Angeles Times](#)**.

However, Flores' facade fell apart on December 23, 2004, when the Columbus police arrested him for a minor traffic accident. During the investigation, officers discovered his true identity, and he was handed over to immigration authorities who charged him with illegal re-entry. He was sentenced to 71 months in prison and sent to Englewood prison in Colorado before being transferred to Big Sandy in Kentucky.

Mula was behind bars again, but his criminal career was about to take off.

The Rise of 'Mula'

At Big Sandy, Flores met José Landa Rodríguez, alias “Fox,” a respected gang-banger who’d become a member of the Mexican Mafia, or eMe, in jail. Known as *carnales*, or soul-brothers, there are but a handful of eMe. Inside some federal and state prisons, they wield tremendous influence over other gang members.



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Flores, on the far right in a black sweatshirt, poses with several Mexican Mafia *carnales*, including Fox, standing with a beige shirt in the middle, in the Big Sandy prison.

The eMe got its start in California, where, inside the state prison system, they created a confederation of Latino gangs. This was to ensure these gangs did not attack each other inside the penitentiary system, even if they were enemies on the outside. The non-aggression pact took on a name, Sur, or South, and its members became known as *sureños*, a reference to their roots in southern California. It eventually grew to include tens of thousands of members across the United States. At the top, of course, was the Mexican Mafia, whose members were often referred to as Los Señores and used the gangs for their own criminal ends.

Rodríguez, for example, had an entourage of *sureños* who obeyed him at will outside the prison. In addition, the eMe leader, who hailed from the Mexican state of Michoacán, had ties to prominent Mexican drug traffickers. As a young man in the early 1990s, he was connected with the Montes family, the main **drug trafficking contact** in California for Mexican criminal groups like the Familia Michoacana and the Knights Templar.

In 2011, the Montes family put Rodríguez in charge of trafficking methamphetamine and marijuana from Michoacán to the United States. This created a longstanding partnership between the eMe and Knights Templar.

While in prison, Flores and Rodríguez quickly formed a deep bond. Flores convinced Rodríguez that the MS13 didn't sell out its people or surrender. It wasn't long before Flores won over Rodríguez, and he soon became a spokesperson for the eMe. He'd make calls to members in other prisons and speak with contacts on the outside in conversations that involved more than just drug deals.

Flores' notoriety had been growing among MS13 members in Columbus due to his bravery and leadership, but he hadn't quite caught the gang's attention across the United States. His arrest was a turning point. Once inside the prison system, he gained relevance, power, and fame.

Eventually, his name started to resonate in Big Sandy and across the country. His fellow MS13 members knew he was also working as a soldier for the eMe and that his contacts with other criminal networks were becoming more frequent. His bond with Rodríguez was such that he even became a prospective *carnal*.

Before Flores was released, Rodríguez saw how their new relationship could help the eMe on the streets. He entrusted Flores to manage the eMe's drug trafficking operations in the United States. At some point, the two decided Flores should settle down in Tijuana. They'd meet again in Mexico as soon as Rodríguez was released, they agreed.

'Mula' in Tijuana

After completing his sentence at Big Sandy in January 2011, Flores was deported to El Salvador, according to a confidential intelligence document from El Salvador's National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil – PNC). This document was obtained by DDoSecrets, an organization that received leaked documents from a hacking group called Guacamaya.

With Rodríguez's support and his future set in Tijuana, Flores didn't stay in El Salvador for long. He left soon after arriving with the help of an eMe secretary in southern California, who assisted him during the almost three-week trip north.

Tijuana was the perfect base for Flores. The border city is home to drug traffickers, smugglers, fugitives, human traffickers, and many others engaged in criminal activity. Some call it "the city of sin," so it was easy for Flores to blend in.

What's more, it was a regular respite for his gang. MS13 members have passed through Tijuana since the gang first formed in Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. Back then, Central American gang members would even pose as Mexicans, so US immigration authorities would deport them to Tijuana by mistake.

"They're not all from the MS13, but from any gang," said Ángel Salvador, alias "Zancudo," one of the first Mexicans to be accepted into the MS13.

Tijuana became a neutral spot where various gang members could coexist. In a way, it felt like an extension of the eMe's Sur philosophy that had spread through California's prison system. The border city also served the eMe's drug trafficking interests. A portion of drug shipments traveling through Mexico crosses the border in Tijuana to reach US consumers. But for that to happen, traffickers need intermediaries that can maneuver the legal and illegal border crossings.

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The eMe was effective in that role, but unlike in the United States, it didn't control any territory. Its members transferred drugs across the border or worked as hired gunmen. In other words, they are servants to Mexico's well-established drug trafficking networks.

Despite its longstanding presence, the MS13 was never able to establish a foothold in Tijuana. With a mix of members primarily composed of deportees from different US-based cliques, MS13 members in Tijuana simply worked to survive or pass through the city.

As such, MS13 gang members in Tijuana can be divided into two categories: the quiet ones looking for nothing more than a place to settle down after years of imprisonment, or the active ones moving drugs across the border or offering their services as hitmen, among other crimes.

Flores became one of the active ones.

The Active Ones

Upon arriving, Robert Ruíz, also known as "Peanut Butter" and a long-time eMe member, welcomed Flores with open arms. Ruíz, who was close with Flores' Big Sandy mentor, Rodríguez, also connected Flores with the best-paying drug traffickers in Mexico. At first, this meant the Knights Templar, a powerful group that had emerged from the remnants of the Familia Michoacana. Later, that would expand.

In addition, Flores' relationship with Rodríguez continued. The two kept in touch by phone even after Rodríguez was transferred from Big Sandy to the county jail in Los Angeles. The conversations, many of which were intercepted by the US Justice Department, were full of coded messages about drugs, politics, and loyalty to the brotherhood. Flores and Rodríguez also discussed plans to work with the Knights Templar in Los Angeles.

Over time, Flores' ambition grew. He began to work with whoever paid the best, according to "Yako," a gang member who knew Flores well but asked for his identity to be withheld for security reasons. Flores went on to become a hitman for the Knights Templar, according to a US federal prison official who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. He also trafficked methamphetamine to various US cities and even dealt with the Sinaloa Cartel, according to Yako.

With time, Flores' revenues grew, and he invested in a chain of small convenience stores called Tecate Six. Throughout, he maintained contact with the MS13. He gave gang members jobs at his stores or provided a place to stay.

Like he had in Ohio, Flores led a double life. While he used his eMe connections to expand his criminal activity, he became widely respected within the MS13 as somebody who looked out for his homeboys. Flores also kept his original MS13 clique close. For instance, he made sure to send money to the Park View Locos leaders back in Los Angeles.

And when he needed a right-hand man he could count on in Tijuana, he turned to another homie, José Alberto Alvarado Molina, alias "Gorras." Molina — who would later be investigated by Interpol for drug trafficking and murder — was famous for his rap songs about the MS13 and had been one of the first to work for Flores at one of his Tecate Six locations.

Still, Flores had his own contradictions. Despite his own criminal activities, for example, Flores told the other homeboys who came to him for support that the gang was not allowed to sell drugs or carry out robberies in Tijuana because the city was not the territory of the MS13 nor the Sureños.

Amidst it all, Flores kept making money and rising in stature. It wasn't long before he owned two taxis and four Tecate Six stores. And after the arrests of several important MS13 leaders in Los Angeles, Flores became the de facto leader of the gang in the city. According to Yako, Flores spent two years overseeing gang operations between Tijuana and Los Angeles.

One example of the small-scale logistics network Flores ran across the United States emerged in a federal indictment filed in 2015 in California. Prosecutors accused Flores of **connecting** methamphetamine dealers to one of his homeboys in a state prison in California. The homebody, using a contraband cell phone, arranged for drug-filled stuffed animals to be sent to Oklahoma and Arkansas.

Overall, prosecutors said, Flores arranged for an estimated 10,000 grams of methamphetamines to be distributed in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and New York. Money was sent to the MS13's top leadership in El Salvador, known as the Ranfla Nacional, and used to purchase weapons, according to Salvadoran prosecutors.



Flores poses with several homeboys in Tijuana. Seated in a white shirt and with his arms crossed, Gorras demonstrates his affiliation to the MS13. Hensy, bottom right, is showing the “garrucha,” an MS13 symbol.

Intrigued, the Ranfla wanted to take things further. Marlon Antonio Menjivar Portillo, alias “Rojo,” a Ranfla member based in Mexico who was close to Flores, proposed that all the homies in Tijuana should run under the “**Mexico Program**.” The program was an extension of the Ranfla’s leadership, and doing so would mean that every MS13 member in Mexico was controlled from El Salvador.

Flores responded with a resounding “no.” It was the clearest signal yet of where his allegiances stood. As a soldier of the eMe, he could not allow the MS13 — or any gang on the border, for that matter — to establish itself in Tijuana. The Sur philosophy that kept the peace between the gangs had to be maintained, he reasoned.

But Menjivar wouldn’t let it go. He contacted Flores again to suggest that any MS13 members buying and selling drugs in Mexico should operate under a single chain of command directed by the Ranfla in El Salvador. Flores was surprised by his insistence but decided to meet him halfway.

He said he could help the Ranfla find cheaper suppliers but nothing more. While he had no intention of going against his Salvadoran counterparts, he explained that he was dedicating his time to the eMe. The Ranfla fell silent.

“Nobody followed up on it,” said Yako.

MS13 In-fighting

Flores’ chest, arms, and legs are covered in tattoos, and his loyalties are clear. He has the number 13 on his chest to show his allegiance to the eMe and the Sur philosophy. Tucked inside the number 13, the letters “MS” represent his gang affiliation. On his upper back, the word “sureño” stretches from shoulder to shoulder above a large “MS” that covers the rest of his back.

From his tattoos to his refusal to help the MS13 expand its drug trafficking in Tijuana, the gang didn't appreciate how Flores had prioritized his affiliations. It was as if the eMe always superseded the MS13.



In spite of his generosity towards fellow MS13 members, the idea that he was more committed to the eMe than his original gang enraged some homeboys, who accused him of prioritizing his personal business over the gang, or what they refer to as the *barrio*.

“When you become too involved with the eMe and the drug trade, your *barrio* is relegated to the back burner, and you lose sight of the original purpose,” said a deported gang member from Los Angeles who is now living in Mexico.

Other homeboys also saw Flores' businesses as acting against the interests of the MS13.

Juan Ramón Cendejas Aguirre, alias “Morro,” was one of them. Cendejas had been in Tijuana for a couple of years after being deported from Los Angeles for **distribution of cocaine**, among other crimes. He claimed to make a living by stealing drugs from small-time drug dealers, but in reality, he often robbed small stores and residents.

Flores had a cordial relationship with Cendejas when he arrived in Tijuana. But over time, their friendship fell apart. Cendejas started bad-mouthing Flores to homeboys who worked for him, perhaps because he felt Flores had betrayed the MS13, or maybe just out of spite. Specifically, he claimed the MS13 members Flores helped were only given the most demeaning tasks while working at his Tecate Six stores.

Tension reached a breaking point in 2015, when three hooded men wearing ski masks and brandishing guns entered a Tecate Six where Flores' wife was working. They gagged her, tied her up, and took about 60,000 pesos (around \$3,000), according to Yako.

Later, analyzing the clothing and build of the assailants, Flores was able to identify one of the assailants as "Hensy," a Salvadoran gang member who had been deported from California. Flores was incensed. He knew Hensy was very close to Cendejas. What's more, assaulting his wife was a grave offense that demanded immediate retribution. During a subsequent meeting between gang members, Molina, Flores' right-hand man, demanded Hensy be handed over within a week. Cendejas reportedly agreed.

But days, weeks, and months went by, and Hensy never appeared, Flores and his allies began looking for him. They spent several nights driving around Hensy's neighborhoods, but Hensy was nowhere to be found.

Things cooled down until one day, Cendejas called Flores and told him he was going for tacos with Hensy and his wife. On the phone, he promised to call later with the exact location. The account gets fuzzy at this stage, but according to Yako, Flores got in contact with a hitman for the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación – **CJNG**). He was taking no chances.

When Cendejas, Hensy, and his wife arrived at the restaurant, they got out of the car, and walked in. At some point, according to Yako, Cendejas went to the bathroom and called Flores. Hensy overheard the call. Without a word, Hensy went to his car, opened the trunk, and took out some gasoline containers. When Cendejas went to see what he was doing, he told him he needed to get gas and then hopped into a taxi with his wife.

But instead of going to a gas station, Hensy went to a friend's. There he left his wife and borrowed a Mini Uzi. By the time he'd returned to the restaurant, the CJNG hitman and Cendejas were back in the restaurant. Shots were fired, and Cendejas collapsed, bleeding profusely.

"They got 'Morro'!" shouted the hitman, referring to Cendejas.

Cendejas had 13 bullet wounds but survived.

Following the shooting, Hensy requested a meeting with Flores. There he came clean about participating in the Tecate Six robbery. He said he only did because Cendejas, who had also been part of the masked assailants who attacked Flores' wife, convinced him to participate.

Flores was stunned, and to placate Flores, Hensy vowed he'd kill Cendejas. But he never got the chance. Drug traffickers killed Hensy in Tijuana in September 2016 for reasons that are still unclear. Seven years after the taco stand incident, in December 2022, Cendejas was also shot and killed in his apartment in Tijuana. Fellow gang members emptied an entire clip into his head.

Escape, Return, and Fall

Flores' criminal career in Tijuana was thriving until the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) heard his name on a wiretap. At the time, the agency was investigating a series of homicides committed between 2013 and 2015 by the Park View Locos in Los Angeles. The FBI monitored him for months, during which officials discovered he was involved in drug trafficking and at least one failed attempt to traffic weapons to El Salvador.

The case led to a US indictment, and on March 5, 2018, Flores was **arrested in Tijuana** in one of his Tecate Six stores. The so-called **High-Level Security Groups** (Grupos de Alto Nivel de Seguridad – Ganseg), formed by the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, aided in his capture. He was accused of conspiracy in the Southern District of Ohio.

US authorities eagerly awaited Flores' extradition, but it never came. According to Salvadoran intelligence reports, Flores was detained in Mexico for only 11 days before being sent to El Salvador in March 2018 despite not facing any pending criminal charges there.

His swift deportation raised red flags. Some of his fellow gang members believed he had bribed Mexican authorities. Yako, for example, said Flores knew of the US extradition request and paid to expedite his repatriation. Two months later, the US government requested that Interpol issue a red notice for his arrest. But Flores was about to go on the move again.

In November 2018, just six months after being deported, Flores returned once again to Tijuana, eager to resume his criminal activity. He continued to lead his double life, working with the eMe to send kilograms of methamphetamine to the United States while also sheltering MS13 homeboys from authorities. FBI investigations revealed that he used the aliases "40" or "Juana" to evade authorities.

But during his second stay in Tijuana, Flores' rancor against the Mexico Program boiled over. He was convinced that Menjivar and the leader of the program, Hugo Armando Quinteros Mineros, alias "Flaco," had handed him over to Mexican authorities. The officers who captured him had told him as much, according to a classified report from El Salvador's Attorney General's Office that InSight Crime obtained. Flores shared this news with one of the gang's most influential ranfleros jailed in California, who coordinated a revenge attack from his cell with Héctor Antonio Alfaro Flores, alias "Crimen."

Alfaro was in El Salvador and prosecutors there had wiretapped his conversations as part of their own investigation. Through intercepted phone calls, they discovered a plan in mid-2019 to bring homies from California and New York to Tijuana to assassinate certain Mexico Program members, according to the document. The attack was eventually thwarted because the gang members coming from New York were arrested on drug charges.

Ultimately, Flores would last less than two years in Tijuana before authorities tracked him down again. On May 20, 2020, he was arrested at one of his Tecate Six shops. This time he was swiftly **handed over** to the FBI at the San Ysidro Port of Entry.

The arrest “hit us hard,” an old MS13 gang member told InSight Crime. “‘Mula’ was our advisor, the one who always had a solution, the one who found a way to support us no matter what.”

Without his help, Flores’ associates couldn’t visit the stores where they worked and didn’t know what to do.

After arriving in the United States, Flores was sent to Ohio. There he plead guilty and was quietly sentenced to five years in prison in June 2021.

According to court records, he is scheduled to be released on September 30, 2024. However, that may not happen. In July 2021, just days after his sentencing in Ohio, the Southern District of California indicted him for methamphetamine trafficking.

That case is ongoing.

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