

[News](#) [Cocaine](#)

ELN, Ex-FARC Mafia Drive Rising Cocaine Production in Zulia, Venezuela

by *Venezuela Investigation Unit*
15 Feb 2024



A series of large-scale drug seizures at clandestine laboratories in a **Venezuelan** border state suggest the ELN and ex-FARC mafia are expanding cocaine processing in a region that was once used only as a trafficking route from Colombia.

Venezuela's armed forces seized 8.6 tons of cocaine at two makeshift processing laboratories in **Jesús María Semprún**, a municipality in the western state of Zulia, and another 650 kilograms at two nearby sites, the Venezuelan military **announced** February 9.

Just a week earlier, authorities seized 350 kilograms of cocaine base and 600 kilograms of the chemical precursor urea at another clandestine lab in Zulia.

SEE ALSO: ***Venezuelan Officials Key in Convicted Drug Trafficker's Network***

In 2023, authorities made three multi-ton cocaine seizures at labs in Jesús María Semprún, which represented almost as much cocaine as was seized in all of **Venezuela** in 2022. Coca plants were also being cultivated in the area.

Authorities did not state who was behind any of the recent laboratories. However, Zulia sits on the Colombia-Venezuela border, just across from the coca-rich Colombian subregion of Catatumbo. This area has long been used as a drug trafficking corridor by Colombia's largest drug trafficking organizations, specifically the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – [ELN](#)) and the [ex-FARC mafia](#), dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – [FARC](#)).

The size of the laboratories, as well as the discovery of uniforms belonging to one ex-FARC mafia front, suggests this group was likely involved.

The ELN and ex-FARC mafia have moved freely across the border between Catatumbo and Zulia for decades. The state became a [base of operations](#) for both groups in Venezuela. It also served as a refuge from the Colombian armed forces thanks to a symbiotic relationship that was developed with former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and, in the ELN's case, strengthened under current president Nicolás Maduro, as InSight Crime detailed in a [previous investigation](#).

InSight Crime Analysis

The ELN and ex-FARC mafia have expanded their cocaine production operations into Zulia as security forces continue to target cocaine production in Colombia.

In early February, the Colombian military discovered three cocaine labs in Norte de Santander department, a hub for coca cultivation on the border with Venezuela, and [seized](#) 4.4 tons of cocaine. The government said the labs belonged to the ELN and the ex-FARC mafia.

Political cover makes the state an attractive base for the ELN, which continues to act with virtual impunity in Zulia thanks to its [positive relationship](#) with the Maduro government. The state benefits economically from the ELN's criminal activities, and the guerrillas' history of forcing residents to vote for Maduro's party means the government will be keen to keep them on their side ahead of 2024's presidential election.

SEE ALSO: [Venezuela Could Be Supplying Colombia's Cocaine Labs With Scarce Precursor](#)

However, the ex-FARC mafia faction that is present in Zulia has not [enjoyed](#) the benefits it once received from the Venezuelan government. In 2021, Maduro's regime decided to provide military support to a rival faction in the southern state of Apure.

Zulia's long-held position as a drug trafficking corridor for cocaine shipments moving from Colombia to Central America and the Caribbean means existing drug trafficking infrastructure is already in place. The ELN [controls much of the territory](#), and the presence of [emissaries](#) from Mexican crime groups like the [Sinaloa Cartel](#) seeking to purchase cocaine makes the state well-positioned for cocaine processing.

While the evidence suggests an increase in cocaine production in Zulia, it is less clear whether cultivation of coca – the plant used to make cocaine – is also expanding. The lack of a comprehensive monitoring system in **Venezuela** means that no one knows how much coca is truly being cultivated in Zulia.

In 2021, 32 hectares of coca crops were **destroyed there** – a miniscule amount. By comparison, coca cultivation in Colombia reached 230,000 hectares in 2022, a 13% jump over the previous year, according to the **latest available** data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

But coca cultivation in Colombia’s Catatumbo region decreased slightly in 2022, according to UNODC figures. It is possible Colombia’s armed groups may now be pushing coca cultivation into **Venezuela**.

“They [the armed groups] are discouraging [coca crops] here in Colombia and they are incentivizing them in **Venezuela**,” a local drug trafficking expert, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime.

*Featured image: Soldiers seized 8.6 tons of cocaine at two clandestine laboratories in Zulia, **Venezuela**. Credit: CEOFANB*

© 2024 InSight Crime.

Powered by Newspack