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Venezuelan Officials Key in Convicted Drug Trafficker's Network

by *Venezuela Investigative Unit*

21 Dec 2023



Carlos Orense Azocar, alias el "Gordo"

The conviction of a Venezuelan drug trafficker in the United States underscores the wide range of services that Venezuelan security forces have provided to trafficking networks.

A US federal court on December 12 found Carlos Orense Azocar, alias “El Gordo,” guilty of leading a transnational drug trafficking network in which active military officials and high-ranking Venezuelan politicians participated.

This institutionalized scheme played a crucial role in the network’s ability to traffic over 40 tons of cocaine per year, according to US investigations.

To operate unimpeded on Venezuelan soil, Orense sought the support and protection of high-ranking government officials, some of whom were linked to the so-called [Cartel of the Suns](#) (Cartel de los Soles), a network of Venezuelan authorities who provide services to various criminal structures in the country.

“His relationship with the Maduro regime allowed him to protect the illegal economies carried out on the farms he owned in Guárico and Apure,” explained Maibort Petit, a Venezuelan investigator and political expert who has followed Orense’s case closely.

Orense was arrested in Italy in May 2021. He was later extradited to the United States in June 2022, where he has been indicted on drug trafficking and weapons charges in the Southern District of New York.

Over the 10 years that the network operated, it used dozens of planes and go-fast boats to move cocaine shipments from Venezuela to the United States via Central America and the Caribbean, according to judicial documents accessed by InSight Crime.

Orense's network also did business with major transnational groups, including the now-demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – **FARC**), the Norte del Valle Cartel (**NDVC**), and the **Beltrán Leyva Organization**.

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In addition to having the financial means, criminal contacts, and infrastructure to dispatch drug shipments out of Venezuela, support from the military was a guarantee that shipments sent by Orense's network would be protected in various ways.

The organization employed active police and military officials to guard its farms and clandestine airstrips, as well as to escort drug shipments smuggled on Venezuelan highways.

Senior intelligence officials, including Hugo “El Pollo” Carvajal, a former chief of military intelligence, provided Orense with official credentials so he could move freely through the country. Carvajal was mentioned in the case and confirmed to US officials that he received bribes from Orense in exchange for providing security for drug shipments, even giving the organization vehicles to transport the drugs.

The collusion between Orense and Venezuelan officials went so far that the South American country's air force provided his organization with transponder codes intended only for military use so the narco-jets used by Orense's network could travel more easily through the region's airspace.

Orense's contacts in the military also helped him acquire heavy weaponry, including rifles and machine guns, which the organization later sold to criminal organizations including the FARC.

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