

What is Tren de Aragua, the Venezuelan gang targeted by Trump?

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Lisa Lambert

BBC News, Washington



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Security officers taking control of Tocarón prison in 2023

In September 2023, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro sent 11,000 soldiers to storm the Tocarón Prison in the northern state of Aragua. But they were not dispatched to quell a riot.

The troops were taking back control of the jail from a powerful gang that had turned it into something of a resort, complete with zoo, restaurants, nightclub, betting shop and swimming pool.

But the gang's boss, Hector Guerrero Flores, escaped.

Now the Tren de Aragua organisation is in the crosshairs of President Donald Trump's drive to remove foreign criminals from the US as part of his pledge to deliver mass deportations of illegal immigrants.

Here is what we do know about Tren de Aragua.

How did the gang start?

Tren de Aragua was originally a prison gang that Hector Guerrero Flores turned into a "transnational criminal organisation", according the US state department, which is offering a reward of \$5m for information that could lead to his arrest.

Guerrero Flores, 41, was in and out of Tocarón for more than a decade.

He escaped in 2012 by bribing a guard and was then rearrested in 2013. Upon his return, he transformed the prison into a leisure complex.

And he expanded the gang's influence far beyond the jail's gates, seizing control of gold mines in Bolivar state, drug corridors on the Caribbean coast, and clandestine border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia, according to the US state department.

The gang's name translates as "Train of Aragua", and it may have come from a railroad workers' union. Aragua, on Venezuela's Caribbean coast, is one of the country's 23 states.

Luis Izquier, a criminology professor at the Central University of Venezuela, told the BBC that the union controlled a section of the railway that crossed Aragua and would extort contractors and sell jobs on work sites.

Tren de Aragua has under Guerrero Flores's leadership expanded into Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile and diversified from extorting migrants into sex-trafficking, contract killing and kidnapping.

How big is the gang?

By most accounts, Tren de Aragua spread out of Venezuela when the country entered a humanitarian and economic emergency in 2014 that made crime less profitable, and now is believed to have nodes in eight other countries, including the US.

The group, in part, operates by forming alliances and partnerships with local criminal organisations.

In Ecuador, for example, the gang is believed to work with groups loosely affiliated with Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, while in Colombia some have alleged that they have worked with members of the left-wing National Liberation Army guerrilla group, or ELN.

Ronna Rísquez, a journalist who has written the definitive book on the group, estimated last year that the organisation has 5,000 members and annual profits of between \$10m and \$15m.

Others have estimated its membership at roughly half that figure.

A prosecutor in Chile has called Tren de Aragua a "brutal organisation" that uses murder and torture to achieve its aims.

While it is smaller or less wealthy than other criminal groups in Latin America, Tren de Aragua is often compared to the ultra-violent MS-13 gang from El Salvador.

Tren de Aragua members have been accused of dressing up as Chilean police officers and then kidnapping Venezuelan opposition military officer Ronald Ojeda, whose body was found buried in Santiago, Chile, in March 2024.

The US Treasury, under then-President Joe Biden, sanctioned Tren de Aragua last summer, saying that the gang was involved in sex-trafficking across the US border.

Is there a threat to the US?

On Saturday, Trump invoked the 18th Century Alien Enemies Act as he accused Tren de Aragua of "perpetrating, attempting, and threatening an invasion of predatory incursion against the territory of the United States".

He said the gang was engaged in "irregular warfare" against the US at the direction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

Shortly after taking office in January, Trump also declared Tren de Aragua a foreign terrorist organisation, placing the group in the same category as the Islamic State and Boko Haram, Nigeria's Islamist militants.

In Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois, alleged Tren de Aragua members have been arrested in recent months and charged with crimes ranging from murder to kidnapping.

In one notable example, two suspects arrested for beating a police officer in Times Square were believed to be members of the gang, according to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

A Tren de Aragua member is also suspected in the kidnap and murder of a 48-year old Florida resident - a Venezuelan national - in early 2024, according to local media reports.

Last summer NBC News reported that the Department of Homeland estimated that 600 Venezuelan migrants in the US had connections to the gang, with 100 believed to be members.

As of 2023, there were 770,000 Venezuelans living in the US, representing slightly less than 2% of all immigrants in the country, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Most had been given protected status by the US government.

Customs and Border Protection reports encountering 313,500 Venezuelan migrants at the border in 2024.

Trump has often said that Venezuela's crime rate has fallen to record lows because the country "emptied out its prisons" by sending migrants to the US.

Statistics kept by the Venezuelan Violence Observatory suggest this might be partly true, with Venezuela's murder rate falling significantly between 2015 and 2023, with some analysts saying that waves of migration - including gang members - created an improved security situation in Venezuelan cities.

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