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# Analyzing the Venezuelan Military's Drug Trafficking

Interdiction Reporting on Social Media



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## Analyzing the Venezuelan Military's Drug Trafficking Interdiction Reporting on Social Media

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A multitude of Venezuelan military accounts regularly report counter-narcotics operations on social media. The Bolivarian National Armed Force of Venezuela (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana, or FANB) posts images and videos of its drug interdictions across multiple major platforms, including Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. These posts appear to be intended to contradict allegations made by the United States and critics of the Maduro regime claiming that the Venezuelan military is actively involved in transnational drug trafficking, although they may also indicate selective enforcement or attacks on rivals and competitors to government-sanctioned trafficking. They also portray downing of suspected smuggler aircraft as enforcement activity, but such actions mean no prosecutions occur that would support the government's assertions. **Social media posts by Venezuelan military accounts about drug trafficking interdictions do clearly demonstrate that Venezuela remains a major drug transit point in South America, but also potentially represent a political propaganda campaign to bolster claims of legitimacy by the Maduro regime in the international community and mask systemic corruption from their domestic audience.**

### Background



According to the 2023 U.S. International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), Venezuela is a major drug transit country and a preferred trafficking route in the Western Hemisphere for illegal drugs, predominantly cocaine.<sup>i</sup> Most of the drug supply moving through Venezuela originates from Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producing country.<sup>ii</sup> Venezuela shares a border with the Norte de Santander department, which is known as a major cocaine producing region in Colombia.<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, the UN reported that Colombia set a new record for cocaine production in 2022, with coca leaf cultivation being 13 percent higher than in 2021 and cocaine production rising from 1,400 tons to 1,738 tons.<sup>iv</sup> The over 2,000 km long Colombian-

Venezuelan border is porous and poorly regulated, allowing for cross-border illicit trafficking and smuggling activity.<sup>v</sup> The Venezuelan states along the Colombian border such as Zulia, Apure, and Amazonas have known incidences of aerial drug trafficking activities, including drug planes and clandestine airstrips.<sup>vi</sup> Drugs are also transported out of Venezuela through sea vessels on the Caribbean. Furthermore, cocaine production has propped up in at least two states in Venezuela in recent years, according to InSight Crime.<sup>vii</sup>

At first glance, the Venezuelan military's social media postings seem to contradict long-standing allegations against Venezuelan political and military officials of drug trafficking involvement. The 2023 INCSR report alleges that the Maduro regime depends on rents from narco-trafficking to stay in power.<sup>viii</sup> In 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and 14 other current and former government officials

with drug trafficking and narco-terrorism charges.<sup>ix</sup> On 19 July 2023, the United States extradited former Venezuelan military counterintelligence director Hugo Carvajal from Spain for drug trafficking charges.<sup>x</sup>



Indeed, the Venezuelan military has faced allegations of drug trafficking involvement going back to the 1990s with networks of military officers involved in corruption and illicit activities, often referred to collectively as the “Cartel de los Soles” (“Cartel of the Suns”).<sup>xii</sup> InSight Crime assesses that the prevalence of the “Cartel of the Suns” proliferated under the presidencies of Hugo Chavez and his successor, Nicolas Maduro, as a means of keeping the military under their political control.<sup>xiii</sup> Furthermore, the Venezuelan government allegedly allows Colombian drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTO) such as the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) and remnants of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) to operate in Venezuela with near impunity.<sup>xiv</sup>

### FANB Social Media Postings

There are myriad accounts claiming to represent different branches, commands, divisions, and officers throughout the Venezuelan military structure on social media. Many of these accounts primarily repost content originally posted by top ranking Venezuelan commanders, most notably of Domingo Hernández Lárez, the Chief General of the Strategic Operations Commander of the FANB (CEOFANB), the commanding organization of the Venezuelan military. These tweets primarily receive engagement from pro-Maduro accounts replying or quote-tweeting with pro-government slogans; many of these accounts appear to have bot-like behavior.<sup>xv</sup> Domingo Hernández Lárez and other Venezuelan military accounts post similar content across multiple platforms, with their accounts on Twitter having the largest followings and generally providing the most primary content and details on drug trafficking interdictions.<sup>xvi</sup> Pro-FANB accounts use a variety of hashtags on Twitter to spread news of drug trafficking interdictions.<sup>xvii</sup>

Hernández reported that the FANB intercepted 39 presumed drug planes that violated Venezuelan airspace as of September 2023.<sup>xviii</sup> According to the Venezuelan National Anti-Drugs Superintendence (SUNAD), the FANB intercepted 45 airplanes in 2022.<sup>xix</sup> Hernández

and other FANB accounts often post videos and images of alleged drug planes being shot down and/or the aftermath. However, FANB sources do not provide videos or images of every airplane interception, so the actual number of airplane interceptions cannot be verified through social media postings alone. Furthermore, neither the FANB nor SUNAD provide data on arrests or trials associated with these airplane interceptions. The images and videos feature smaller private airplanes such as Cessnas and Sabreliners that are commonly favored by drug runners.<sup>xx</sup> The planes are often shown to have Mexican call signs.

On 9 September 2022, Hernández tweeted that the FANB seized a clandestine airstrip in Catatumbo, Zulia along with 2,610 kg of cocaine.<sup>xxi</sup> The cocaine reportedly transported from North Santander Department, Colombia by Venezuelan citizens working with Colombian DTOs. The FANB alleged that the cocaine was meant to be shipped to Belize and distributed to the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG).<sup>xxii</sup>

On 21 September 2022, Hernández tweeted that a Mexican Sabreliner plane with the call sign XB-RXG was shot down near a clandestine airstrip in the state of Zulia on the previous day.<sup>xxiii</sup> The plane was supposed to fly from Cozumel, Mexico to Aruba but changed direction towards Venezuelan airspace illegally. The plane was previously registered in Venezuela as YV415T between 2009 and 2014, according to the Aviation Safety Network accident database.<sup>xxiv</sup> The plane's ownership passed to another American company in 2015 before finally being acquired by a Mexican businessman based in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon in 2021. Contrary to the FANB's claims, Mexican investigative journalism site EMEEQUIS reported that there were no indications of any flights with XB-RXG's registration, transponder, or airplane type that departed from Cozumel on September 20.<sup>xxv</sup> Sources in the Mexican Air Force further told EMEEQUIS that there are no indications that the plane had crashed or exploded, and that the plane appeared to have been set on fire while on the ground since there was no damage shown on the runway. This suggests that the FANB may have staged the interdiction.



The text of this tweet from Hernández reads, "A Sabreliner aircraft with the registration number XB-RXG from Mexico bound for Queen Beatrix Airport, Aruba, that changed course and illegally entered Venezuelan airspace was disabled by the integral aerospace defense system on a clandestine runway in the state of Zulia."

On 6 February 2023, Hernández posted that the Venezuelan air force stopped a Dassault Falcon 20 with the Mexican call sign XB-RHF in the state of Barinas alleging it belonged to Colombian DTOs.<sup>xxvi</sup> On 2 June 2023, Hernández posted footage of a Venezuelan Air Force pilot shooting down a plane near the Pedro Camejo municipality in the state of Apure.<sup>xxvii</sup> Hernández alleges that the plane, a Sabreliner with the Mexican call sign XB-RAD, was flying between Cozumel, Mexico and Curaçao and diverted itself towards Venezuelan territory. According to the Aviation Safety Network database, the plane's call sign was fake.<sup>xxviii</sup>

FANB accounts also post reports of maritime drug trafficking interdictions. On 27 January 2023, Hernández reported that the FANB carried out a joint operation with Colombian and French authorities to intercept a boat in the Caribbean with 324 kg of marijuana.<sup>xxix</sup> On 6

March 2023, Hernandez posted that the FANB cooperated with French authorities to capture a boat carrying 1,753 kg of cocaine 250 miles away from Barbados.<sup>xxx</sup> No indications of French reporting on either interdiction were found at the time of this writing, and only Venezuelan officials, flags, and ships are shown in the images.

On 3 March 2023, Hernández posted images of a “narco-sub” captured on the Orinoco River.<sup>xxxii</sup> The narco-sub resembles another narco-sub captured by the FANB on the Arauca River in April 2022.<sup>xxxiii</sup> According to submarine expert H. I. Sutton, the captured narco-sub differs from other narco-sub found outside of Venezuela in that they are fully submersible and operate in in-land rivers instead of the open seas.<sup>xxxiiii</sup>

Venezuelan military accounts have also posted captures of drug labs on Venezuelan soil in 2023. On 10 March 2023, Hernández posted images of a coca paste lab captured by the FANB in Zulia.<sup>xxxv</sup> On 11 September 2023, Hernández posted a video of the FANB destroying a drug lab close to the border in Zulia. The following day, he posted a video of himself at the drug lab demonstrating the processed cocaine.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## Analysis

The FANB’s social media postings about their drug trafficking interdictions provide insights into regional drug trafficking trends. They demonstrate that the Venezuelan states bordering Colombia remain major transit points for trafficking cocaine and marijuana. The postings also prove that foreign drug trafficking organizations, including Colombian armed groups and Mexican cartels, are actively operating in Venezuelan territory. Small planes flying to and from western Venezuelan border states to Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean continue to be a primary method for trafficking drugs out of the country, but other methods of transit such as boats and narco-sub are also demonstrated. The FANB also provides further evidence of cocaine production taking a hold in Venezuela’s border regions.

Nonetheless, the social media postings do not absolve the Venezuelan military from drug trafficking allegations. Insight Crime posits that the “Cartel of the Suns” operates as a loose and fluid network of drug trafficking cells embedded throughout the Venezuelan military’s organization and have increasingly become more fragmented and complex since Nicolas Maduro’s rise to power in 2013.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Rather than being directly involved in drug trafficking, political and military leaders in the Venezuelan government serve as administrators who regulate drug trafficking in order to ensure the military’s loyalty to the Maduro regime. Indeed, drug trafficking interdictions may serve to punish drug traffickers for overstepping their reach or not paying bribes. Additionally, it is difficult to verify the accuracy of all the Venezuelan military’s claims on social media, and interdiction reports may be fabricated in part or in whole. Venezuelan anti-narcotics reporting also often lacks information about arrests or trials of drug traffickers involved in interdictions, which may cast further doubts about FANB drug interdiction claims.

Furthermore, Maduro actively seeks to regain international legitimacy and ultimately nullify international sanctions, and promoting successful drug trafficking interdictions may serve this purpose. The FANB’s counter-narcotics outreach on social media parallels other reported pro-Maduro propaganda campaigns on social media. The BBC reported that the Maduro regime uses bots and pays users on social media to post political propaganda and promote

pro-government hashtags.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bots and paid users make up to 90% of interactions with pro-government hashtag #SomosInteligenciaSocial, according to an analysis conducted by Latin American anti-disinformation NGO ProBox.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Venezuelan disinformation analysts claim that the Maduro regime's use of bots and paid users helps drown out critics with noise and disrupt social media algorithms.<sup>xxxix</sup>

### Key Factors Shaping Future Developments:

- **This social media campaign may be part of an effort by the Maduro regime to achieve rapprochement with the international community.** Pro-government social media campaigns may bolster the regime's efforts to legitimize itself internationally, find partners abroad, and solidify its hold on power. These campaigns also serve to drown out domestic dissent. However, the regime would need to prove that its campaign aligns with regional goals and meets standards of rule of law to be effective.
- **Institutional weakness and corruption will remain long term challenges.** Even in the event of Maduro's downfall, decentralized corruption networks within the military and government and the presence of non-state armed groups in Venezuela's border regions will continue to enable drug trafficking activities. The extent to which enforcement activities address corruption will be a signal of the regime's seriousness about rehabilitating its image.
- **The extent to which cocaine production expands or is thwarted in Venezuela will be another indicator of the regime's seriousness.** Cocaine production in Colombia continues to break record levels. While cocaine production levels in Venezuela are comparably much smaller than other South American countries, absent persistent and effective enforcement activities, Venezuela may play a greater role in cocaine production in the future.

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- <sup>i</sup> United States Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume 1, Drug and Chemical Control," March 2023, 215. <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/INCSR-2023-Vol-1.pdf>
- <sup>ii</sup> France 24, "Colombia sets new cocaine production record, UN," 11 September 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230911-colombia-sets-new-cocaine-production-record-un>
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> International Crisis Group, "Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela," 14 December 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/84-disorder-border-keeping-peace-between-colombia-and-venezuela>
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- <sup>vii</sup> InSight Crime, "Venezuela's Move to Cocaine Production: Crops, Chemists and Criminal Evolution," 3 May 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/venezuela-move-to-cocaine-production-crops-chemists-and-criminal-evolution/>
- <sup>viii</sup> United States Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume 1, Drug and Chemical Control," March 2023, 215, <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/INCSR-2023-Vol-1.pdf>
- <sup>ix</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charge," 26 March 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/nicol-s-maduro-moros-and-14-current-and-former-venezuelan-officials-charged-narco-terrorism>
- <sup>x</sup> Reuters, "Venezuela's ex-spymaster pleads not guilty to US drug trafficking charges," 20 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/venezuelas-ex-spymaster-face-drug-trafficking-charges-us-court-2023-07-20/>
- <sup>xi</sup> Attorney General William Barr et al, "Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charges," U.S. Department of Justice Press Conference, 26 March 2020 <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/documents-related-march-26-2020-press-conference>
- <sup>xii</sup> InSight Crime "Cartel of the Suns," 14 May 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/cartel-de-los-soles-profile/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> "Today, the catch-all term 'Cartel of the Suns' masks the fact that the state-drug trafficking axis is now less a network run by the military and Chavista politicians and more a system that it regulates. It is composed of a series of regional military-political-criminal nodes that are bound together by a national regime that guarantees impunity for its allies. Within this system, the regime rewards loyalty through assignment to regions known to offer a wealth of opportunities for enrichment through drug trafficking and other criminal economies." Ibid.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Gustavo Ocando Alex, "Los pactos impunes de la guerrilla colombiana en Zulia," 18 May 2016, <https://elestimulo.com/climax/investigacion/2016-05-18/los-pactos-impunes-de-la-guerrilla-colombiana-en-zulia/>
- <sup>xv</sup> The Influence Intelligence tool by Signal Labs shows that a significant number of accounts that interact with FANB accounts and related hashtags have an automation score of 50 out of 100 or higher. These accounts often repeat the same content word for word or use one-line slogans without adding any substantial commentary or discussion, which suggests bot rather than human activity.
- <sup>xvi</sup> As of the time of this writing, @dhernandezlarez has 132.4 thousand followers on twitter, 32.6 thousand on TikTok, and 17.5 thousand on Instagram.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Hashtags commonly associated with Venezuelan drug trafficking interdictions include, but are not limited to, the following: #FANB, #RelampagoDelCatatumbo., #OperaciónCaciqueMurachí, #OperacionAutana2023, #CEOANB, #TANCOL, #EscudoBolivariano, #RelampagoDelCatatumbo2023, #EscudoBolivariano2023.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Twitter, G.J. Domingo Hernández Lárez, 14 September 2023, <https://twitter.com/dhernandezlarez/status/1702463525094830451>
- <sup>xix</sup> Superintendencia Nacional Antidrogas, "Informe Nacional Antidrogas Venezuela 2023," 104, accessed 12 October 2023, <https://www.sunad.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Informe-Nacional-Antidrogas-Venezuela-2023.pdf>
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- <sup>xxiv</sup> Aviation Safety Network, 21 September 2022, <https://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=20220921-0>; Planelogger, "YV415T Private Owner Sabre 65," <https://www.planelogger.com/Aircraft/Registration/YV415T/794799>
- <sup>xxv</sup> Santiago Alamilla, "¿Venezuela derribó avión mexicano o fue destruido en tierra?," 24 September 2022, <https://www.mx.com.mx/al-dia/venezuela-derribo-avion-mexicano-o-fue-destruido-en-tierra>
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Twitter, "G.J. Domingo Hernández Lárez," 6 February 2023, <https://twitter.com/dhernandezlarez/status/1622773010364092416>
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Twitter, "G.J. Domingo Hernández Lárez," 20 June 2023, <https://twitter.com/dhernandezlarez/status/1671263759032090633>
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Aviation Safety Network, "ASN Wikibase Occurrence # 315530," 20 June 2023, <https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/315530>
- <sup>xxix</sup> Twitter, "G.J. Domingo Hernández Lárez," 27 January 2023, <https://twitter.com/dhernandezlarez/status/1619117479233720321>
- <sup>xxx</sup> Twitter, "G.J. Domingo Hernández Lárez," 6 March, 2023, <https://twitter.com/dhernandezlarez/status/1632835614897848321>
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Twitter, "G.J. Domingo Hernández Lárez," 3 March, 2023, <https://twitter.com/dhernandezlarez/status/1631608121763168256?s=20>
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- <sup>xxxvi</sup> InSight Crime, "Beyond the Cartel of the Suns," 2 May 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/beyond-the-cartel-of-the-suns/>
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- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Ibid.

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xxxix *ibid.*



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