

ENGLISH EDITION

This is how the ‘Aragua Train’ operates, the transnational mega-gang that frightens South America

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The 'Aragua Train' (Tren de Aragua) in Chile, one of the safest countries on the continent, causes commotion and generates terror among citizen



The ‘Aragua Train’, as the transnational mega gang that terrorizes South America is known, was born in the state of the same name, in central Venezuela, about a decade ago.

According to experts, this feared organization is led by Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias «Niño Guerrero», who is currently imprisoned in the Tocarón prison for various crimes, including homicide.

There is consensus among experts that Tocarón functions as the «headquarters» of the 'Aragua Train', reports the *BBC*.

Origins of the 'Train'

According to Luis Izquier, professor of Criminology at the Central University of Venezuela, the gang was born «about 12 or 14 years» ago in a worker's union that controlled a section of the train that would cross the state of Aragua.

«Union members extorted contractors, sold jobs on the construction sites, and became known as 'those from the Aragua train' », says the organized crime expert in an interview with *BBC Mundo*.

«Some of these individuals ended up in a local prison known as the Tocarón prison and from there, they began to gain strength as a criminal organization», said Izquier.

The expert explained that, from prison, Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero began to group former members of the worker's union and other common prisoners and gradually built the organization that we know today.

First they expanded outside the prison to other sectors of the Aragua state.

«Today they control the San Vicente neighborhood in the Aragua state, which has become their epicenter of control outside the Tocarón prison», he adds.

Then they expanded to the rest of the country: «It is known that they are in the Sucre state, controlling drug trafficking routes, and they participate in illegal mining in the Bolívar state».

Leadership

According to organized crime expert Ronna Risquez, who is currently writing a book on the *Tren de Aragua* (*Aragua Train*), the first time the *Aragua Train* began to be heard as an already established criminal gang was in 2013, months after the escape from the Tocarón prison of the “Niño Guerrero”, who was recaptured almost a year later.

«Before that, there were several organizations, some associated with the Tocarón prison and others that operated outside the prison in the Aragua state and who were linked to the railway that was under construction in that area», told the researcher to *BBC Mundo*.

«That’s where the name *Tren de Aragua* comes from».

Risquez assures that Guerrero Flores is the official leader, but adds that the group could have at least two other leaders, and that it is suspected that one could be in a Venezuelan mining state and the other abroad.

Criminology professor Luis Izquier explains that the «Niño Guerrero» is capable of controlling the ‘Aragua Train’ from prison because, for several years, some prisoners have «taken over» control of some prisons in Venezuela through the leadership of prison gangs.

«Everything that happens inside these penitentiaries is managed by these criminals, who have more power than the directors of the prisons or the soldiers who guard them», he explained.

Criminal leaders in Venezuela are known as the «pranes» and Héctor Guerrero Flores is perhaps the most important in the entire country.

According to Izquier, this occurs with the complicity of many state officials, whether by «action or omission».The ‘Train’ expands

Ronna Risquez affirms that she has identified the presence of the ‘Aragua Train’ in eleven states of Venezuela, but its activity is currently not limited to the borders of the Caribbean country.

She notes that while the first public evidence of a foreign expansion by the group was in Peru in 2018, its international operations may have started earlier.

On August 3 of that year, the Robbery Investigation Division of the Peruvian police arrested five members of a gang they identified as «*Los Malditos del Tren de Aragua*». They seized three firearms, a truck, a pineapple-type grenade, and a ski mask.

One of the detainees, the Venezuelan Edison Agustín Barrera, alias «catire», admitted to having committed six homicides in Peru as a hit man.

Since then, the gang has expanded in that country. On July 19, the local police arrested four Venezuelan nationals involved with the ‘Train’ on the tenth floor of a building in Lima, the country’s capital.

In neighboring Brazil, authorities have identified links between the ‘Aragua Train’ and the *First Command of the Capital* (PCC), the country’s most important criminal organization – and which was also born in a penitentiary – in the state of Roraima, which shares its border with Venezuela.

The gang’s activities have also been registered in Colombia.

“In Colombia, it began operating in the border area with Venezuela, between Táchira and Norte de Santander, where they now control the border crossing on the Colombian side. Then it expanded to other Colombian regions, including more recently, Bogotá», says Risquez.

At the beginning of July, a video in which two subjects can be seen beating, torturing and suffocating a migrant to the point of taking his life served as evidence for the Bogotá police to capture alias *Alfredito* and *El Capi* in the town of Kennedy, two presumed members of the ‘Aragua Train’.

According to the Colombian authorities, the criminal group has been fighting, since 2021, with other Colombian gangs for control of the drug business in Bogotá.

«Its hallmark is to cause fear»

Three weeks before the police operation in Bogotá, much to the south of the continent, the head of the Northern Anti-Narcotics and Organized Crime Prefecture of the Chilean police, Rodrigo Fuentes, offered details of how the mega-gang operates in Chile.

«They obey a leader. They have people linked to the management of weapons, others who worry about collecting money, known as *vaccines*, as extortion, and hitmen», explained the official to Chilean media.

«They kill according to an order. Here, the figure of the normal hit man that we know, where there is a prize or a remuneration promise, does not occur. Here is an order from a leader who orders the killing of a person who does not pay for the *vaccine*, when the person is extorted», he added.

According to sources, much of the money obtained illegally is sent to Venezuela.

«The organization itself has leaders who are in Venezuela and these leaders become operational branches in different countries».

Mario Carrera, who is a regional prosecutor for Arica and Parinacota, a region near Chile’s borders with Peru and Bolivia, described it as «a rather crude organization in its way of acting».

«Normally, a criminal organization seeks to act with secrecy so as not to arouse further suspicion. Not these people, their hallmark is to cause fear and for this, they use the techniques that we have seen, homicides and torture», he said last week during an interview on *Radio Cooperativa de Chile*.

The 'Aragua Train' has also been accused in Chile and in other countries of trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation and migrant smuggling. Thousands of members

Ronna Riskey explains that although its presence has been verified in countries like Colombia and Peru, it is presumed that the 'Aragua Train' operates in many other countries.

“By operating on the border between Chile and Bolivia, it is presumed that they are in Bolivia. By operating on the border of Chile and Argentina, it is also presumed that they operate in Argentina. It is also believed that they are in Costa Rica and Panama”, continues the expert in organized crime.

For his part, Luis Izquier assures that the gang has a presence in Ecuador, sometimes controlling the border crossing with Colombia.

According to the specialized site *Insight crime*, the 'Aragua Train' has become a «transnational criminal threat».

«It has followed the trajectory of the exodus of Venezuelan migrants and has found a way to establish permanent operations in several countries», he says.

Calculating the number of members of the 'Aragua Train' is complicated, but Izquier calculates that it could be between 2,500 and 3,000 individuals, while Ronna Riskey's estimate goes up to 5,000.

Riskey considers it important to highlight that this is a group that is not dedicated to a single criminal activity, which gives it an «advantage» over other

gangs.

«The ‘Aragua Train’ has a great capacity to adapt. It is not a group dedicated exclusively to drug trafficking or smuggling or kidnapping. It looks for niches and gaps to enter and precisely one of the niches that it has taken advantage of is Venezuelan migration», she points out.

«Venezuelan migrants may have become the main victims of the ‘Train’. They extort them, use them for migrant or human trafficking and sexual exploitation”.

«They don’t have the weapons of the Mexican cartels or the knowledge of managing illegal businesses that the FARC dissidents have or their experience, but they know how to move and adapt».

Fuente: [El Ciudadano](#)