

# Tren de Aragua

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THE CASE OF CHILE AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS:  
EXPANSION, STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGIES

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## Overview of Tren de Aragua in Chile

In June 2022 Chilean police initiated *Operación Tren del Norte* against the Venezuela-based *Tren de Aragua* transnational criminal group, in the small northern shantytown of Cerro Chuño, near the city of Arica. The raid eventually led to the dismantling of the *Gallegos* cell of that organization, gathering the richest data and documentation to date on the group's operations and sophisticated financial structure, providing new insights into that complex criminal structure.

The subsequent investigation of the *Gallegos* branch of the *Tren de Aragua* (TdA) showed the sweeping breadth of the organization that until then had not been targeted and was little known in Chile. The initial raid resulted in the arrest of 16 people believed to be responsible for seven homicides, including burying victims alive under cement slabs.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the police found 80 kilos of illicit drugs, 18 automatic rifles and machine guns, more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition, clandestine torture chambers and multiple houses of prostitution using children as sex slaves.<sup>2</sup> Investigators said this was a small fraction of the overall arsenal of the group, based on internal communications and videos that were seized.

By June 2023 Arica prosecutor Bruno Hernández and his team had charged dozens of members of the TdA/*Gallegos* branch with homicide, human trafficking, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, sexual exploitation of minors, and extortion. Prosecutors also identified some 350 members of the TdA in Chile, many of them already convicted and in prison for violent crimes without recognition of their TdA ties.



Figure 1: Police searching clandestine grave sites in Cerro Chuño (left), handguns found (center) and tattoo on the severed arm of one of the bodies buried under a cement slab (Courtesy of judicial authorities)

The TdA is not a new criminal structure but has commanded increasing attention – and a designation as a terrorist organization by the Trump administration – over the past two years as it has expanded its increasingly sophisticated, brutal and diversified operations to Chile, Peru, Colombia, the United States and elsewhere. The TdA has established itself as a top tier criminal brand operational in at least six countries..

<sup>1</sup> <https://elpais.com/chile/2023-06-07/enterrados-y-vivos-y-tapados-con-cemento-los-ultimos-dos-homicidios-que-impactan-al-norte-de-chile.html>

<sup>2</sup> The sources of the details of the case are the court records and extensive interviews with the lead prosecutor over several months in 2024 and 2025.

Despite the burst of attention, there is a scarcity of reliable information and fieldwork to understand the organization within the current context of rapid criminal evolution in Latin America. This study aims to help fill that void and provide a clearer understanding of what the threats of TdA really are.

The study is based on a review of court documents and evidence in cases against the TdA, including the Cerro Chuño raid; interviews in Chilean prisons with member of the TdA; interviews with TdA prosecutors, law enforcement and intelligence officials in three countries who investigate the group; interviews with victims of the TdA,, and a literature review, interpreted through three decades of mapping the evolution of transnational criminal structures in the Western Hemisphere.

The data shows an innovative international structure with significant support from the Maduro regime in Venezuela, operating as a predator and parasite operating through the vast Venezuelan diaspora communities in the hemisphere. The group is not a drug cartel but as arbiter of all illicit activities conducted in areas the group controls. This territorial control gives access to revenues from kidnapping, extortion, prostitution, human trafficking and money laundering, as well as the trafficking of cocaine and synthetic drugs.

This innovative TdA model is part of the Fourth Wave of transnational organized crime sweeping Latin America due to changing cocaine consumption patterns outside of the Western Hemisphere, the spread of synthetic drugs, and the growing presence of extra-regional transnational criminal structures such as the Balkan mafias, Ndrangheta of Italy, and Triads of China in the region. These extra regional groups need local partners for their strategic buy largely invisible expansion.<sup>3</sup>

This broad based economic model allows the TdA to expand through territorial control, beginning by establishing violent cells within diaspora communities that have little recourse to law enforcement or judicial structures because of their irregular immigration status; expand its territory rapidly through intimidation based on extreme, highly visible violence, including decapitations; and offer local groups the opportunity to brand themselves as TdA for a price, creating a franchise model that further expands the influence and power.

The legal and economic vulnerabilities of the diaspora communities offer some of the aspiring members, usually but not exclusively young men, an opportunity become economically empowered through criminal activity, and gain protection against attacks from other gangs and the police.

Two primary drivers of the TdA's rapid expansion in recent years are:

- The mass exodus of Venezuelans from their homeland, creating an unprecedented wave of migration across the hemisphere and creating Venezuelan diaspora communities in every country. The U.N. International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that from 2018-2024, some 7.9 million people have fled Venezuela. These mass movements simply overwhelmed formal and informal border crossing that were completely unprepared for the unprecedented flow of human being;<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See: [https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi\\_research/64/](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi_research/64/) where Farah describes the four waves as: Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Cartel; the rise of the Cali Cartel and Mexican allied groups; the criminalized states of the Bolivarian Revolution led by Venezuela; and the current wave of new actors, new markets, new products and the fragmentation illicit markets.

<sup>4</sup> <https://respuestavenezolanos.iom.int/en/about-regional-venezuela-situation> The group estimates that 2.8 million Venezuelans are in Colombia, 1.7 million in Perú, 550,000 in Ecuador, and 450,000 in Chile, but these numbers are likely

- The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing retreat of law enforcement and border control enforcement across Latin America, making it possible to move to new countries with relatively little risk of being apprehended or returned home.

The TdA, with its innovative diversification and franchising efforts, is similar in many ways to the MS-13 (*Mara Salvatrucha*) in the Northern Triangle of Central America and the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) in Brazil. All three groups came into existence in inhumane and degrading prison conditions as a form of self defense that was later successfully transplanted beyond the prison walls.

Both the PCC and MS-13 can be described Community Embedded Transnational Armed Groups, rooted in their home communities, while operating in other countries.<sup>5</sup> The MS-13's rapid evolution has allowed the one-time violent street gang to establish itself in Central America, and to a lesser degree in Mexico, as both trusted middlemen for moving and distributing cocaine from South America and Mexican drug trafficking organizations and as a major political force, primarily in El Salvador. The group has also taken over many of the migrant smuggling and trafficking networks.

The PCC has grown from a Sao Paulo-based armed gang to a formidable regional force, operating in Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay with significant military force and control of enormous illicit economies from drug trafficking to port corruption to sophisticated jewelry heists.<sup>6</sup>

What separates the TdA from those two groups is that it primarily operates far from the home communities in Venezuela, deliberately designed as an expansionist policy to embed in communities far from their home base driven by external factors like mass migration, the Maduro regime's forced expatriation of criminal communities, and weakness of the states' capacity to respond where the TdA has established itself. The group's capacity to control prisons and operate command and control structures from behind bars, is another new element.

By creating this new "exoskeleton" criminal network far outside Venezuela, the structure has adapted and evolved, building new bases in diaspora communities but uprooted from its home country. This new model of the TdA presents new challenges across the hemisphere.

## Case Study of the TdA in Chile

The TdA's rapid and long undetected expansion in Chile offers a useful case study of how the organization spreads, acquires territory through methods using extreme violence, impose a multi-faceted extractive revenue from illicit economies, and remain creative and innovative in their operations. Peru, Ecuador and Colombia are undergoing similar challenges with the TdA, but none has had the same level of limited success in meeting the challenges as Chile.

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significantly higher because of ongoing migration and the inability of the governments to keep accurate records of informal populations.

<sup>5</sup> We used this term as defined by Farah and Richardson in the May 2022 study "Gangs No Longer," published at National Defense University to describe criminal groups that operate in the strategic space between street gangs and transnational criminal organizations. See: <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-38.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/first-capital-command-pcc-profile/>

According to imprisoned members of the TdA in Chile, prosecutors and police investigators, the TdA began to establish a permanent presence in Chile in 2018/2019, seeking control of the first Venezuelan migrant communities established with mass exodus of people fleeing the Maduro regime. These communities were largely in the sparsely populated highland borders with Peru and Bolivia, where there have historically been few border controls, and those that existed were further weakened by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the course of the next few years, as the Venezuelan diaspora spread south to the capital of Santiago and then even further south, the TdA followed, inserting itself, and its growing, violent control of illicit economies, at every step.

In keeping with the TdA's innovative *modus operandi*, the leader of the *Gallegos* in Arica was a Venezuelan, Yoneiker Paredes Fagúndez, AKA The Dwarf. Most of those arrested were also Venezuelan, but group included Colombians, Dominicans and Chileans – a mix of nationalities that is unusual in country-based criminal groups. This capacity for adapting could further be seen in the example of Jonahary Jaquelin Navarra, AKA *La China*, who was in a high position of authority. Female leadership is rare across the criminal gangs of Latin Americas.<sup>7</sup>

Another innovation was that much of the electronic communications among gang members was done through a code using strings of emojis instead of words or letters. These sequenced strings of emoji were sent on messaging apps where the messages are erased after being read, but screen shots can be taken.

The decryption of these codes for communications remains an ongoing challenge to understanding the TdA's ability to connect with cells and among members and one IBI Consultants is working with Chilean investigators to better understand.

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<sup>7</sup> The sources of the details of the case are the court records and extensive interviews with the lead prosecutor over several months in 2024 and 2-25.

















| LOS GALLEGOS SIMBOLOGÍA EMOJIS  |  |
|---|--|
|  | <b>Emoji píldora:</b> Hace referencia a la venta, distribución o consumo de drogas, ya que las píldoras son comúnmente asociadas con sustancias controladas y medicamentos. Se usan para codificar mensajes y evitar que las autoridades comprendan fácilmente sus comunicaciones. La píldora es una parte de un mensaje más complejo que solo los miembros del grupo y clientes lo entienden.   |
|  | <b>Emoji Bolsa dinero:</b> En sus comunicaciones principalmente se usa para representar actividades relacionadas con el dinero, tales como extorsión, tráfico de drogas, secuestros, y otras operaciones financieras ilícitas. Este emoji es una forma visual de simbolizar las ganancias y las operaciones económicas de la organización.   |
|  | <b>Emoji Calavera:</b> Se utiliza para intimidar y enviar mensajes de amenaza. Este emoji simboliza muerte, peligro y violencia, y es empleado por la organización para reforzar su imagen de brutalidad y control dentro de su red criminal. El emoji es una herramienta visual que complementa estas actividades ilícitas al comunicar el riesgo mortal asociado con enfrentarse a ellos.  |
|  | <b>Emoji Mordaza:</b> La herramienta para apretar es utilizada por "Los Gallegos" dentro del contexto del Tren de Aragua, tiene un significado simbólico que trasciende su uso literal. La mordaza, que se usa para apretar y mantener un objeto firmemente en su lugar, simboliza el control y la coacción que "Los Gallegos" ejercen sobre sus víctimas o territorios que controlan. Este uso simboliza como aprietan o dominan a las personas y áreas bajo su influencia.   |
|  | <b>Emoji Marciano explotando:</b> Representa la reacción que desean provocar en sus objetivos, indicando que algo impactante o inesperado va a suceder. Puede ser usado para advertir sobre una acción sorpresa o un ataque inminente.   |
|  | <b>Emoji Corona:</b> Al usar este emoji, el Tren de Aragua comunica su dominio sobre ciertos territorios y áreas de influencia, señalando que tienen el control absoluto en esas regiones y que cualquier intento de desafiar su autoridad será enfrentado con fuerza. El uso de la corona por parte del Tren de Aragua sirve para reforzar su imagen de poder y control tanto dentro de la organización como en sus comunicaciones externas, ayudando a mantener su reputación y autoridad en el mundo del crimen organizado. |
|  | <b>Emoji Lobo:</b> El Tren de Aragua utiliza el emoji del lobo en sus comunicaciones para representar astucia, ferocidad y trabajo en equipo, cualidades asociadas con los lobos en la naturaleza. Este símbolo puede transmitir varias ideas clave dentro de la organización criminal: El uso del emoji del lobo puede servir para intimidar a sus rivales y víctimas, sugiriendo que la organización es tan peligrosa y poderosa como un lobo en la caza. Es utilizado por líderes y personas cercanas a ellos.              |
|  | <b>Emoji de edificio:</b> Este emoji está asociado a tribunales y sistemas judiciales. El Tren de Aragua lo utiliza para comunicar mensajes relacionados con la justicia, ya sea para desafiar a las autoridades o para referirse a miembros que se encuentran privados de libertad.   |
|  | <b>Emoji Diablo:</b> Con su apariencia siniestra, es utilizado para intimidar a sus rivales o víctimas, sugiriendo que cualquier desafío o traición será enfrentado con severidad. Este emoji ayuda a reforzar la percepción de que la organización es peligrosa y que sus miembros son implacables.   |
|  | <b>Emoji Bomba:</b> Emoji de bomba es utilizado para intimidar a sus rivales, víctimas, o incluso a las autoridades, sugiriendo que están dispuestos a usar violencia extrema para lograr sus objetivos.   |
|  | <b>Emoji Marciano:</b> El emoji de alienígena puede simbolizar algo fuera de lo común, diferente o alocado, especialmente en el contexto de las drogas, como "Marciano". El Tren de Aragua podría usar este emoji para indicar situaciones y operaciones que son inusuales o fuera de lo estándar, destacando la naturaleza única de ciertas actividades.  |
|  | <b>Emoji Ataúd:</b> El ataúd es un símbolo claro de muerte y es utilizado para amenazar a enemigos, rivales o víctimas con la posibilidad de ser asesinados si no cumplen con las demandas de la organización. Es una forma de enviar un mensaje explícito sobre las consecuencias mortales de desobedecer o traicionar al grupo.  |
|  | <b>Emoji Dinero con alas:</b> Este emoji puede ser utilizado para indicar que alguien ha perdido dinero, ya sea debido a deudas impagas o robos. En el contexto de extorsiones, puede servir como una advertencia de que habrá consecuencias financieras si no se cumplen las demandas.  |
|  | <b>Emoji Tren:</b> El emoji del tren es utilizado por el Tren de Aragua y Los Gallegos en redes sociales como un símbolo de identidad y pertenencia. Este emoji se relaciona directamente con el nombre de la organización, "Tren de Aragua," y se usa para marcar presencia, identificar a sus miembros y comunicar su influencia y control en diversas áreas. Representa la fuerza y cohesión del grupo, así como su capacidad para operar de manera organizada y eficiente en el mundo del crimen.                          |
|  | <b>Emoji Diamante:</b> Representa algo de gran valor y pureza. En este sentido, podría referirse a la pureza de las drogas (cocaína) que trafican, asegurando a sus compradores la alta calidad de sus productos.  |
|  | <b>Emoji Águila:</b> Las águilas son conocidas por su visión aguda y su capacidad para vigilar grandes áreas desde las alturas. Este emoji se utiliza para simbolizar la vigilancia constante y el control que el Tren de Aragua ejerce sobre sus territorios y operaciones.   |

Figure 2: Emojis and translation of meaning provided by Chilean prosecutors who deciphered TdA/Gallegos communications.

While the trial of the *Gallegos*/TdA in Arica was slowed by death threats against prosecutor Hernández, an attempt to blow up the court and witness intimidation, in November 2024, 34 of the 38 people charged were convicted of violent crimes, including aggravated homicide, extortion, drug trafficking and other crimes. It was the most successful case against the TdA to date.<sup>8</sup>

Chile is a particularly attractive target for expansion by the TdA because of its history of welcoming refugees and its large Venezuelan diaspora community, coupled with the fact that the nation has historically faced little violent crime. This meant that Chile's law enforcement, intelligence, and judicial structures are largely unprepared and untrained for the type of violence and complex crimes perpetrated by the TdA and the prison system remains weak and vulnerable.

It is likely that without the willingness of Prosecutor Hernández and his team of investigators to face the personal risk of pursuing this case far beyond the confines of the original local crime, the TdA/*Gallegos* would have gone uninvestigated. Among the findings of particular value were the accounting books of the gang which shed new light on the multiple criminal economies the group was involved in.

<sup>8</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/tren-aragua-chile-vinculos-banda-gallegos-narcotrafico-db0c5cf4dd79b9a450af538317116f4e>

**HABER** 1

MARTES 31-05-2012

|                               | ENTRADA   | SALIDA   |
|-------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Efectivo Loro                 | 204000    |          |
| Efectivo Pasta                | 735000    |          |
| Casos Cuartil 113             | 5660000   |          |
| Pastelería Por cubrir         | 300000    |          |
| Deposito de Loro y Pasta      |           | 935000   |
| Pasta Por vender              | 4581500   |          |
| Lote Por vender 4K            | 1200000   |          |
| Lote Por vender               | 280000    |          |
| ENTREGADO a la Bandera 100K   |           | 5000000  |
| SE VENDO 1K MARI              |           | 500000   |
| Pasta de la G 11              | 1100000   |          |
| Pasta de PIVPA 2              | 200000    |          |
| Pasta de la G 900 Grams       | 900000    |          |
| Salida 7 Bulto de Pasta de G  |           | 1000000  |
| Salida 2 Bulto de Pasta de PA |           | 200000   |
|                               | 911016500 | 60435000 |

Quedan 11 K Pasta

Se Recogio Lunes 17 de noviembre

Mary 1700  
Dura 1050  
Loro 1955

Se Mando para taqueria

525 Argenis Peri  
900 Loro Malo  
Marya 1700  
Pasta 1050  
Gota 140  
Linea plaza colon 240

Figure 3: Pages of TdA/Gallegos financial accounts found in the Cerro Chuño raid.

While the strength of Chile's judiciary and other state institutions rank among the strongest in the region, the police and intelligence structures have no experience with groups like TdA. Chile's traditional hospitality to regional refugees and its traditionally porous borders with Peru, Bolivia and Argentina, also left successive governments unequipped to deal with massive flows of migrants that contain small but important criminal elements.

These weaknesses, along with Chile's highly developed infrastructure, isolated mining communities where the state is largely absent, and extensive and unpatrolled shantytowns with tens of thousands of Venezuelan migrant to prey on all make it likely Chile will continue to play a major role for the TdA.

## The TdA History and the Maduro Regime

The TdA was not created overnight but was decades in the making. The shift to serious criminal organizations began to be visible during Venezuela's prison crisis in the early 2000s, when incarcerated criminal structures began to control illicit economies inside and outside the prison structure through violence, extortion, drug trafficking and other local markets, supplanting the fragile state presence in those regions. These groups established corrupt, utilitarian ties to law enforcement, political leaders and businesses, creating a permissive environment where the criminal groups could expand.

These emerging, ideologically agnostic alliances spread across Venezuela, creating an ecosystem where corruption, authoritarianism and criminality could co-exist in a fragile equilibrium held

together by the high profit margins each group could generate. These alliances could also be used as instruments of political and social pressure to obtain specific benefits, given that groups like the TdA are rational actors who use all available means of power to further their goals.

The utility of the TdA to the Maduro regime is best understood as one of multiple asymmetrical, low cost and low risk tools or strategies the regime – backed by Russia, China and Iran—use to disrupt democratic governance, rule of law and U.S. influence across the hemisphere, including the United States.

The massive outflow of migrants from Venezuela over the past six years has allowed the regime, at almost no cost to, to execute a strategy that has strained and weakened the economic and social fabric of countries like Chile, Peru and to a lesser degree Colombia who have criticized the Maduro regime for its massive human rights abuses, electoral fraud and economic collapse. At the same time, as Venezuelan migration to the southern border of the United States has accelerated the TdA has followed it, becoming part of a major political and economic crisis for the United States.

Intelligence analysts and prosecutors say the TdA is part of a larger, scattershot campaign by the Maduro regime and its allies to sow chaos and disrupt democratic governance in the region by using mass migration as an asymmetrical weapon, much as Moammar Gaddafi did in Libya and the Turkish government does with the European Union. At the same time, the constant flow of remittances from the Venezuelan diaspora communities eases the pressure on the Maduro regime's collapsing economy.

The economic cost of sheltering and feeding the migrants in countries with scarce resources, the rapidly rising crime rates that accompany the arrival of desperate migrants, and the lack of international support for the host countries all create immediate and long-term challenges to democratic governments seeking to operate within the rule of law and respect for human rights.

In tis context, the TdA is an extremely useful though not wholly controlled part of this overarching migration strategy pushed by the regime that has had an enormous impact on destabilizing the hemisphere from Chile to Mexico, while opening opportunities for the organization to send members to blend into the flow of hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants seeking entry into the United States.

The TdA's history begins in 2004/2005 in Tocarón Prison in the state of Aragua under the Venezuela regime of Hugo Chávez. In 2005 Chávez declared a “prison emergency” to try to crack down on widespread prison violence, particularly Tocarón. The group's mythology says the main criminal gang in Tocarón at the time named its after an unfinished railroad line Chávez was building near the prison.

Those incarcerated who emerged with power over time, through negotiations with the government, violence and bribery formed the system of *pranantos* and the leaders were called *pranes*.<sup>9</sup> These prison groups organized into larger structures they called *Trenes* or Trains, creating parallel governance structures, and the *Trenes* are formed by smaller groups called *carros del tren* or train cars. From 2015-2018 the TdA grew to the largest of 19 criminal *megabandas* (Mega Bands) operating in Venezuela that sent the homicide rate soaring to record levels.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/tren-de-aragua/>

As prison life in Venezuela mutated, becoming in many cases “open cities” under the control of prisoners who lived with their families, created command and control structures for robberies, kidnappings and drug trafficking, while functioning semi autonomously from the state. This control was negotiated with the Venezuelan state at the local, regional and national levels over time, building links between the TdA and Maduro regime officials on a broad though likely decentralized scale, as do many other criminal organizations.

Because of the experience gained in controlling and organizing and prisons from the inside over the past two decades, prisons have become the natural habitat for the leaders of these groups. Rather than being a punishment, incarceration, particularly for the leaders, is often a desired safe, controlled environment for conducting business without fear of being apprehended. Prisons are also used to recruit new members, particularly those with cyber and weapons skills. This internal prison control generates a significant amount of revenue from the sale of drugs and commodities like cell phones, dominated by the group.

While operating with a clear chain of command, the TdA, is both vertically integrated and organizationally flat at an operational level. This means that there are clear leaders whose orders are followed, but that orders and objectives are transmitted in a general way and local franchises implement them as they see fit within the guidelines in the controlled territory.

With internal violence and chaos rising, the Maduro regime opened its borders to allow millions of Venezuelans to leave, mostly by walking across the porous border into neighboring Colombia. This led to one of the TdA’s first important expansionist strategies: taking control of the informal migrant pathways across the border, known as *trochas* or trails.

By taking control of these points, the group began to remit to Venezuela significant revenues paid by desperate migrants while also facing its first violent confrontations with Colombian-based guerrillas groups that operated in the border hinterlands. The systematic exploitation of the migrants, with a strong efforts to control nodes of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, opened the floodgates for TdA expansion across the region and avoided direct conflicts with existing armed groups dedicated to drug trafficking.

From 2018-2023 the TdA became a transnational network, following the flow of Venezuelan migrants across Colombia into Ecuador, Peru, Chile and, to a lesser degree, Bolivia and Brazil. As it grew under the leadership of Héctor Rusherford Guerrero Flores, AKA “Niño Guerrero,” the group maintained a vertically integrated structure, with local chapter given broad autonomy to follow the overall leadership guidelines but latitude in how to establish themselves. One of the group’s founders, Larry Alvarez, AKA Larry Changa, was one of the leaders of the TdA’s expansion.

The criminal career of Alvarez, who was born in Aragua in 1997, began with car thefts in the late 1990s, and he was first arrested in 2002. After serving a 4-year sentence, he assassinated a car parts salesman and in 2006 was sentenced to 17 years in prison. In the Tocarón prison he helped form the TdA, along with “Niño Guerrero” and Yohan José Guerrero, AKA Johan Petricia.

Alvarez escaped from Tocarón prison in 2015 and in 2018 lived in Chile, using his real name. When police opened an investigation into his activities he moved to Colombia, where he was arrested and is awaiting a judicial ruling on Chile’s request he be extradited.

Despite the Maduro's regime's denials, TdA leaders reportedly maintain close ties to leaders of the regime, including Iris Varela, the former minister for prisons and current vice president of the National Assembly.<sup>10</sup>

Among the favorite tactics used by the TdA to subjugate the diaspora communities are the use of graphic, visible violence to intimidate the population and any potential competition; loan sharking operations in a desperate community, a practice known as *gota a gota* (drop by drop) to accumulate cash and keep people indebted; retail drug operations (*narco menudeo*); extortion of local businesses; armed robbery; and murder for hire (*sicariato*).

These long-standing ties of the TdA leadership and Guerrero specifically, to the Maduro regime were brought into focus in the grisly assassination in Chile of Ronald Ojeda, a former Venezuelan military officer who had been granted political asylum in Chile in 2018.

While the Maduro regime carried out a highly publicized raid on the Tocarón prison in September 2023, sending 11,000 troops into the decrepit prison structures that still house 7,000 prisoners, it is not clear what the motivation or impact of the raid was. Several of the leaders inside Tocarón managed to escape arrest during the raid under unclear circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

## The Case of Assassination of Ronald Ojeda in Chile

On February 21, 2024, armed men dressed as police officers kidnapped Ojeda, an outspoken critic of Maduro who had participated in a 2017 military revolt against the regime. The abduction was filmed by surveillance cameras. Ten days later an anonymous caller gave police the location of Ojeda's body, which was found cut into pieces in a suitcase and buried under 4.5 feet of concrete.<sup>12</sup>

In January 2025 Chilean prosecutors publicly stated their hypothesis in the case, based on witnesses and other evidence: Maduro's right hand man and regime enforcer Diosdado Cabello had paid the TdA, through Guerrero, to carry out the assassination. Members of the *Los Piratas* branch of the TdA were identified as the executors of the kidnap and murder through WhatsApp chats found on the suspects' telephones.<sup>13</sup>

The investigation also found that Guerrero's main lieutenant and co-founder of the TdA in Chile, "Larry Changa," had lived in Chile from 2016-2022 and ran a food outlet in the upscale Jockey Club, just a few yards from the presidential palace, and often personally served his clients there. He is also currently arrested in Colombia, along with Guerrero, awaiting possible extradition to Chile.

<sup>10</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/ejercito-venezuela-invade-tocoron/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/ejercito-venezuela-invade-tocoron/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.latercera.com/la-tercera-pm/noticia/un-llamado-anonimo-asfixia-y-un-imputado-que-dice-trabajar-de-delivery-y-que-prestocobertura-para-el-secuestro-las-pistas-del-aun-inconcluso-crimen-del-teniente-r-ojeda/HJKP2GG4ABD2FJ5RJZGAWZAXXM/>  
<sup>13</sup> <https://www.latercera.com/nacional/noticia/el-nexo-de-nino-guerrero-con-chile-y-el-crimen-de-ronald-ojeda/TLNZZFFMZUNELBBISCZVKMXOFXQ/#>

The assassination of Ojeda, along with the confirmed presence of two of the TdA's top leaders there for several years and Cerro Chuño raid all demonstrate the centrality of Chile to the TdA's regional expansion.



Figure 4: U.S. Department of Justice wanted poster for Guerrero, posted April 2024 (Left); Ronald Ojeda in Chile

## The TdA in the United States

President Trump has made presence of the TdA in the United States a primary justification for taking dramatic action against irregular migrants inside the country and against those seeking entry to U.S. by crossing the Mexican border. The designation of the TdA (along with the MS-13 and not-yet named Mexican cartels) is a significant escalation of both the language and tactics against irregular migrants under the Trump administration.

A review of both the TdA's history and available data in the United States suggests the structure is not a terrorist threat to the Homeland, but a significant criminal element that has successfully exploited desperate diaspora communities to gain a foothold inside the United States.

This is not to say that the TdA is not a dangerous, violent criminal structure, whose ability to establish a permanent presence in the United States presents multiple threats and challenges. As the Venezuelan diaspora communities in the U.S. have swelled and been granted Temporary Protected Status mitigating the fear of deportation, the TdA has been able to embed in communities from New York to Arizona.

With a long history of targeted assassinations and control of illicit economies in areas under the TdA control, the group is better understood as a predatory criminal structure with some ties to the Maduro regime, rather than a terrorist organization with clear political/ideological/theological motivations and coherence.

One key element that makes evaluating the size of the TdA presence in the United States is that the group has no distinguishing characteristics and there is no information sharing with the Venezuelan government. Thus, it is often impossible to know if someone who claims that association is really a member of the group or using a non-existent relationship to generate fear and respect among other criminals.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/news/what-we-know-about-tren-de-araguas-us-presence/>

So far, in none of the cases publicly presented by officials in 10 states that purport to tie arrested Venezuelans and other to the TdA has any information been made public on how the link was made.<sup>15</sup>

As U.S. Border Patrol Council Vice President Chris Cabrera told reporters in September, “as a federal agent we have no way of vetting these people other than the honor system. If they tell us their name, we can’t check against Venezuela’s data base.”<sup>16</sup>

This in turn makes evaluating the real threat inside the United States difficult at best, leading to a cacophony of reports equating the threat of TdA to that of ISIS and groups with kinetic battlefield capabilities far beyond those shown so far by the TdA.

## Conclusions

The TdA is an innovative, predatory, extractive and extremely violent criminal structure that has rapidly established itself as primary actors in emerging Fourth Wave of transnational organized crime in Latin America. To a lesser but significant degree the group is now operating in pockets across the United States.

Rather than embedding in its home communities— as other groups like the MS-13, PCC, emerging Ecuadoran gangs like *Los Lobos* and *Los Choneros*, and many others – the TdA has created an expanding exoskeleton expansion model, allowing its members to embed with and prey on nomadic diaspora communities across much of the hemisphere.

This new model has established the TdA not as a drug trafficking organization or smuggling operation, but a structure based on territorial control that uses territorial control to extract revenues and acts as gatekeeper for multiple illicit economies operating in controlled territory.

With its blend of hierarchical leadership and autonomy afforded local structures under the leadership, the TdA has a demonstrated ability to innovate, adapt and learn from other groups.

Given this reality, the emerging strategy of the Trump administration to move suspected TdA members arrested in the United States to a prison in El Salvador that exclusively houses MS-13 members and members of other criminal organizations, is likely to be extremely damaging. The history of co-locating members of different criminal groups together shows they learn from each other, exchange lessons learned, and often create joint ventures for their structures outside of prison. Rather than diminish the power of these groups who have long histories of flourishing while incarcerated, a new and much more dangerous alliance is likely to emerge.

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<sup>15</sup> The states are Colorado, Texas, New York, Illinois, Florida, Louisiana, Indiana, Georgia, Virginia and New Jersey. See: <https://insightcrime.org/news/what-we-know-about-tren-de-araguas-us-presence/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/news/what-we-know-about-tren-de-araguas-us-presence/>

