

ORION FORUM

# Tren de Aragua's Fall and Delcy Rodríguez's Rise

JUNE 15, 2026

On June 12, President Donald Trump [announced](#) that U.S. forces had killed Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, better known as Niño Guerrero, the founder and top leader of Tren de Aragua, in a swift kinetic strike on Venezuelan soil. [According to the White House](#), the operation was conducted in close coordination with the interim government led by Delcy Rodríguez.

Guerrero had been one of the hemisphere's most notorious fugitives. U.S. authorities accused him of transforming [Tren de Aragua](#) from a prison gang into a transnational criminal enterprise spanning Latin America and the United States. Washington had offered [a reward of up to \\$5 million](#) for information leading to his capture.

Even while moving in and out of prison, Guerrero expanded the gang's reach, allegedly taking control of gold mines in Bolívar state, drug trafficking corridors along Venezuela's Caribbean coast, and clandestine border crossings with Colombia. Tren de Aragua became a symbol of the collapse of state authority in Venezuela and the regional export of organized crime.

But the real significance of this episode lies not in its target. It lies in the fact that the strike happened at all and in the unexpected level of Venezuelan cooperation that made it possible.

This was the first direct U.S. ground strike in the region in years, setting aside the operations that led to Nicolás Maduro's capture. Yet it took place not over Venezuelan objections, but with Venezuelan facilitation. The level of access and coordination Caracas extended exceeded what many of Washington's traditional allies in Latin America would likely have offered under similar circumstances.

From the Trump administration's perspective, the operation offered something politically valuable. It was a clear foreign policy and intelligence victory. After a costly and unresolved confrontation with Iran, the White House needed an achievement that could be summarized in a single sentence ahead of the midterm elections: We killed the head of the cartel. That message might resonate.

Throughout Trump's second term, Tren de Aragua occupied a central place in the administration's security narrative. The President repeatedly described the group as engaging in irregular warfare against the United States and designated it a foreign terrorist organization. The gang featured prominently in the administration's first wave of deportations, with officials arguing that the presence of alleged members inside the United States formed part of a broader invasion through the southern border. U.S. officials described Tren de Aragua as responsible for countless acts of violence, extortion, and drug trafficking across North America, South America, and Europe.

Niño Guerrero's death therefore closes a political loop years in the making. The administration had built an entire architecture around the idea that Tren de Aragua represented the defining security threat in the Western Hemisphere. That framework justified terrorist designations, expanded deportation authorities, and the creation of the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition.

Yet President Trump may not have been the biggest winner. By helping Washington eliminate Niño Guerrero, Delcy Rodríguez converted a counternarcotics operation into a guarantee of her own political survival. More importantly, she demonstrated how useful her government could be to the United States.

This is, after all, essentially the continuation of the same political regime that Washington considered a national security threat only six months ago. Before January 3, the United States accused the Maduro government of facilitating narco terrorism, filed criminal charges against senior regime figures, captured Maduro himself, and identified organizations such as Tren de Aragua as criminal enterprises that had been cultivated, tolerated, and eventually exported by the Venezuelan state. The administration argued that these networks helped spread violence, extortion, and instability far beyond Venezuela's borders.

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Six months later, the Rodríguez government is authorizing U.S. military operations on Venezuelan territory and presenting itself as a reliable security partner. [Venezuelan authorities](#) quickly issued statements emphasizing their role in the joint operation and claiming credit for the success. The same political elite that transformed Venezuelan prisons into criminal command centers and permitted Tren de Aragua's expansion across the continent is now speaking the language of security cooperation.

Rodríguez has also managed to appropriate one of the opposition's strongest arguments. She demonstrated that she can deliver, on Washington's terms, the very agenda María Corina Machado's movement could only promise if it ever reached power by confronting the criminal structures embedded within the Venezuelan state. It allows her to consolidate power and secure international relevance without facing voters.

U.S.-Venezuela cooperation has accelerated rapidly since Maduro's fall. Initial openings centered on the energy sector and the gradual reentry of American companies into the Venezuelan economy. The Niño Guerrero operation pushed the relationship into an even more consequential arena, security cooperation. In effect, Venezuelan authorities sent Washington a clear message: You can count on us in the fight against [transnational criminal organizations](#).

Since this new arrangement in Caracas appears to benefit both Delcy Rodríguez and the Trump administration, deeper cooperation is likely to follow. Venezuela could expand intelligence sharing against transnational criminal groups, intensify operations against the remnants of Tren de Aragua, and accept more deportation flights while taking steps to limit irregular migration to the United States.

Each of these measures would further tie Rodríguez's political survival to Washington's priorities. While Venezuela's opposition continues to wait for elections and democratic transition, Rodríguez is pursuing a different strategy. She is making herself useful. And in Washington, usefulness can translate into influence that often outweighs political legitimacy.

*\*image credit: AA.*

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