

BOWLES'S NEW AND ACCURATE MAP OF THE WORLD, OR TERRESTRIAL GLOBE, laid down from the BEST OBSERVATIONS and NEWEST DISCOVERIES; particularly those of the celebrated CIRCUMNAVIGATORS; Illustrated with a variety of useful PROJECTIONS and GEOGRAPHICAL DEFINITIONS, TABLES, and PROBLEMS: With an easy and familiar Explanation

of the WORLD, OR TERRESTRIAL GLOBE, by ANSON, BYRON, WALLIS, BOUANSVILLE, COOK, and REPRESENTATIONS of the HEAVENLY BODIES: the most approved ASTRONOMICAL and of the most curious and interesting Phenomena in the UNIVERSAL SYSTEM.



# Venezuela, Military Generals and the Cartel de los Soles

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Open Source, Foreign Perspective, Underconsidered/Understudied Topics

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## **Venezuela, Military Generals, and the Cartel de los Soles**

Since the early 90s a group of military generals known as the Cartel de los Soles (Cartel of the Suns) has been involved in transporting and distributing inbound and outbound shipments of cocaine in Venezuela. The original Cartel de los Soles received its name in 1993 when two Anti-Drug National Guard generals were investigated for their involvement in the cocaine trade. As brigade commanders, each wore a single sun as insignia on their shoulder boards, and hence, were referred to as the “Cartel del Sol (singular).” The name was later changed to “Cartel de los Soles (plural)” as higher ranking generals with up to four sun insignias became involved in drug trafficking activities within Venezuela.<sup>i</sup> Today this group continues to play a key role in moving cocaine shipments both nationally and internationally, but fundamental differences in affiliation, rank structure and operational capacities set it apart from traditional cartels in the region and have led to speculation as why exactly the group is referred to as a “cartel” in its own right.

### **Affiliation**

The Cartel de Los Soles is the only known drug organization in the region completely comprising military and government officials. In fact, Cartel de Los Soles leaders are involved in every realm of Venezuela’s drug-trafficking structure, which makes them a criminal force to reckon with. Furthermore, their unique make-up of high-ranking officials offers them unique command and control posts at every major airport, checkpoint, and port where drugs shipments pass through. This is especially true in states including Apure, Zulia and Táchira, which all lie along Venezuela’s shared border with Colombia.

Cartel de Los Soles status within the Venezuelan military also affords it a heightened level of impunity and unrestricted use of government resources to run its business.<sup>ii</sup> For example,

military commanders have the authority to determine which shipments will be searched at checkpoints and are able to falsify documents such as IDs and paperwork so that shipments are able to pass through subsequent control points. All the while, subordinate soldiers are used to actually carry out the work needed to ensure that shipments arrive at their final destination. This was likely the case with a 1.3-ton shipment of cocaine that passed through 12 separate military checkpoints spanning 500 miles in Venezuela before being boarded onto an Air France flight bound for Paris in September 2013. Ten days later French authorities announced the record-breaking seizure, which quickly gained attention because of its size/value and the fact that the Venezuelan military was completely kept in the dark regarding the operation, given their alleged involvement with it.<sup>iii</sup>

Just as the Cartel de Los Soles, Mexican and Colombian drug cartels are known to work with corrupt military, police, and government officials at the highest levels, but the difference with the latter is that cartel leaders are not government-appointed officials. Instead, government employees at all levels are used by Mexican/Colombian cartel leaders to facilitate the movement of shipments and to ensure the organization is able to run its day-to-day operations without interference from authorities and other cartels. In many cities soldiers and police also serve as informants and provide cartel leadership with information regarding possible threats to the organization such as impending police/military operations or the arrival of adversaries.

### **Rank Structure**

The rank structure of the Cartel de los Soles strictly comprises high-ranking military/government officials and is really a hybrid hierarchical organization when compared to other cartels in the region. For example, Mexican/Colombian cartels operate on a strict hierarchical structure, which is usually pyramid shaped with a clearly defined leader at the top,

region plaza leaders directly underneath, lieutenants in the middle, and henchmen at the bottom. Orders come directly from top leaders, and while plaza leaders do have limited autonomy, they are not given free reign to run their section of the organization as they desire. Additionally, most, if not all high-ranking Mexican and Colombian cartel leaders are eventually identified by authorities and must use excessive financial resources and government connections to evade capture.

In the case of the Cartel de Los Soles, government and military leaders run the actual organization and, at the same time, structure arrest warrants and create laws which directly benefit them. Diosdado Caballo, the National Assembly President of Venezuela, has been the leader of the organization since around 2006, and has been adept at changing the structure of the organization as it has evolved.<sup>iv</sup> There is a hierarchy within the group, but it is not as strict as Mexican/Colombian organizations. Instead, it operates more like a horizontal hierarchy with multiple autonomous leaders. Power is also more evenly distributed as opposed to being nearly absolute, as in Mexican/Colombian organizations. This idea was confirmed by Leamsy Salazar, a protected witness in the US and the former Security Chief of Diosdado Caballo. Salazar stated that it was Caballo who had the last word on which government and military officials would receive appointments. Salazar further indicated that colonels and generals assigned to leadership positions were independently responsible for giving orders to their subordinates and that these orders were to be followed exactly and without questions.<sup>v</sup>

## **Operational Capacities**

The Cartel de Los Soles is not responsible for producing drugs, setting prices, or restricting competition, as Mexican and Colombian cartels are. Hence, by referring to it as a cartel, one would assume that the group is responsible for setting the price of cocaine in the country, as, by definition, a cartel is an association of manufacturers or suppliers with the purpose of maintaining prices at a high level and restricting competition. However, this is not the case with the Cartel de los Soles. Instead, it is responsible for the transport of FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) cocaine shipments through Venezuela to key hubs in Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Suriname. This group also sends large-scale shipments from Africa into Europe.<sup>vi</sup> In this sense, the Cartel de los Soles could be compared to transport groups hired to move drugs through Central America. Conversely, Colombian- and Mexican-based cartels are involved in virtually every step that is taken to produce, transport, ship, and set pricing of drugs.

When looking at the affiliation, rank structure and operational capacities of the Cartel de Los Soles, it becomes apparent that it operates differently than other organizations in the region. By definition alone, it does not meet the actual criteria for a cartel, but the reality is that it is actually much worse. One expects explicit criminality and corruption from drug cartels and there is the obvious assumption that drug trafficking cannot occur without the help of government officials in some capacity. In the case of the Cartel de Los Soles, high-ranking government officials run the drug-trafficking organization, which makes it nearly impossible to dismantle it. Only recently has international attention been brought to this organization, and it is difficult to determine what course of action it will take to lower its profile. What can be expected is that identified leaders will avoid international travel, given the arrests of alleged high-ranking Cartel

de Los Soles officials in Aruba and the United States in 2014 (Hugo Carvajal, who was later sent back to Venezuela, and Benny Palmeri-Bacchi). However, it is not realistic to think that the Cartel de Los Soles will stop its trafficking activities any time soon, as there is simply too much to lose financially. International media are already hyper-critical of Venezuela, and one more government scandal is not likely to make officials step down. Instead, any further accusations will likely be dealt with by classifying identified parties as “rogue officials.” Or, just maybe, the accused will be welcomed with open arms, as was the case with Carvajal, who has been praised by the Maduro government as a counterdrug hero responsible for the arrests of over 72 wanted drug lords.

## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> “Cartel de Los Soles (The Cartel of the Suns).” *El Tiempo*. Accessed on June 05, 2015 from <http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/justicia/justicia-de-ee-uu-va-por-los-del-cartel-de-los-soles/14305970>

<sup>ii</sup> “NARCOMILITARES: El cartel de los Soles, el negocio del narcotráfico (Narco Army: The Cartel of the Suns and Drug Trafficking).” *Reportero 24*. Accessed on June 01, 2015 from <http://www.reportero24.com/2015/02/narcomilitares-el-cartel-de-los-soles-el-negocio-del-narcotrafico/>

<sup>iii</sup> “Massive 1.3 Ton Haul of Cocaine Worth \$270 Million Discovered in Paris after Being Smuggled Aboard Air France Flight from Venezuela.” *Daily Mail*. Accessed on October 01, 2014 from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2429729/1-3-tons-cocaine-worth-270m-discovered-Paris-Air-France-flight-Venezuela.html>

<sup>iv</sup> “Identifican a Diosdado Cabello como jefe del Cartel de los Soles (Diosdado Cabello Identified as Leader of Cartel de los Soles).” *El Nuevo Herald*. Accessed on April 09, 2015 from <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/venezuela-es/article8206548.html>

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> “Así opera el "Cartel de los Soles (The Modus Operandi of the Cartel de Los Soles.” *El Propio*. Accessed on May 23, 2015 from [http://www.elpropio.com/actualidad/ciudad/Ex-asesor-Chavez-cuenta-Cartel-Soles\\_0\\_676132418.html](http://www.elpropio.com/actualidad/ciudad/Ex-asesor-Chavez-cuenta-Cartel-Soles_0_676132418.html)