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Assassination Plot Resurfaces with Honduran President's Re-election Bid

by George Rodríguez

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The plot dates back to 2014, when hitmen were reportedly hired to gun down Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. The assassination did not take place, but six conspirators were arrested in 2015. And on March 18, the Tribunal de Sentencia (Sentence Court) in Tegucigalpa announced its decision on the plot participants—two Mexicans and four Hondurans, all involved in drug trafficking.

The court found Jesús Gumaro Jaime, the group's leader and one of the Mexican nationals involved, as well as José Javier "El Diablo" ("The Devil") Contreras and Víctor Lorenzo "Lencho" Flores, both Honduran, guilty of conspiracy to assassinate the president.

Flores and Contreras were also found guilty of unlawful association against the country's security.

Héctor Antonio "Toño Fronteras" ("Border Tony") Vásquez, another Honduran, was found guilty of unlawful association, while Everaldo Enrique Figueroa, the second Mexican, and Karla Ulloa, Flores' girlfriend, were acquitted. The sentencing hearing has been scheduled for April 24, according to Melvin Duarte, spokesperson for the Corte Suprema de Justicia (Supreme Court of Justice, CSJ).

A week before the ruling, President Hernández, who has made the war on organized crime a centerpiece of his administration, won the nomination of the ruling and rightist Partido Nacional (National Party, PN) for the November presidential contest. His bid for a new term in office was made possible by a constitutional reform approved by the unicameral Congreso Nacional (National Congress), the institution he headed for the four years preceding his 2014 presidential inauguration ([NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2017](#)).

Plotters had support from Mexican cartel

The plotters were captured after Honduran authorities were alerted by US officials, in 2014, about a conspiracy underway by local drug traffickers, with support from the Sinaloa Cartel, one of Mexico's top criminal organizations.

The assassination was to take place on Sept. 20 or 21, 2014, at the airport in the city of Gracias, the president's hometown, 200 km northwest of Tegucigalpa, where Hernández was scheduled to travel by helicopter.

In telephone conversations wiretapped by Honduran authorities, Flores is heard telling one of the other plotters the he had been hired by the leaders of the Valle Valle clan, a large organized crime group disbanded in Honduras in 2014, when the leaders were arrested and extradited to the US ([NotiCen, April 2, 2015](#)).

Mexican journalist Joaquín López Dóriga wrote on his website that in the recorded conversations, Flores was heard saying, "[They] hired me and sent three Mexicans from Sinaloa to carry out the mission to kill the president ... Everything's ready; all we're waiting for is the .50 caliber Barrett, long-distance weapons."

An unidentified security source told local media that the plot to kill Hernández derived from the war Hernández launched against drug organizations after taking office in January 2014. As a result of the offensive, more than a dozen drug leaders have been extradited to the US.

According to an account published on March 20 by the local daily *Tiempo*, the two Mexicans entered Honduras on Sept. 3, 2014, through a blind spot on the 256-km land border with Guatemala. The locals were in charge of logistics, including weapons and vehicles, the paper added, mentioning that the Valle drug clan had hired the group.

Tiempo also reported that the conspirators met at Ulloa's house, in Colonia Vanessa, a neighborhood in the western Honduran city of Copán.

"The United States government confirmed in April 2015 that it had alerted Honduran authorities in 2014 about a plan by drug traffickers to assassinate President Hernández," the daily reported. "After the US alert, the Honduran intelligence service managed to foil the plan, capturing nationals and foreigners, and finding 'weapons that confirmed how the president was going to be murdered,' then-Foreign Affairs Minister Arturo Corrales said in April 2015."

President revealed details

Late last year, Hernández himself revealed some details of the plot, which according to his account, involved a local organized crime group and also targeted US Ambassador to Honduras James Nealon. At the time, he said the plot had been orchestrated by an "Atlantic criminal group," but *Tiempo* reported in March that "the Valles are repeatedly mentioned in several of the recorded communications."

Almost half the drug traffickers the Hernández administration has delivered to the US were top members of the Valle Valle organization, a group that was linked to Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel. The organization was busted in 2014 when Honduran police captured its main leaders—brothers Miguel Arnulfo Valle Valle, Luis Alonso Valle Valle, and José Inocente Valle Valle, and the latter's wife, Marlen Amaya. The four were extradited. The Valles' sister, Digna Azucena Valle Valle, was already in the US, where she had been arrested in possession of cocaine and charged with drug trafficking.

In a country historically gripped by violence, several plots to murder presidents have been hatched. One was actually carried out on Jan. 11, 1862, in the Honduran city of Comayagua, then the nation's capital, when Gen. José Santos Guardiola (1856-1860, 1860-1862) was shot at dawn in his home. Guardiola entered Honduran history as the country's first president to actually finish a constitutional term, and also the first to be re-elected.

In the 20th century, three heads of state were unsuccessfully targeted: Vicente Mejía (1929-1933), Gen. Tiburcio Carías (1933-1949), and Carlos Roberto Reina (1994-1998). More recently, Ricardo Maduro (2002-2006), whose "war against crime" was both a successful campaign slogan and a government security policy, and Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (2010-2014), who took office seven months after the bloody coup that toppled Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009), revealed assassination plots.

Cracking down on drugs

Since he became president on Jan. 27, 2014, Hernández has been cracking down on drug-trafficking networks such as the Valle Valle clan and Los Cachiros, a similar organization with connections to the Rosenthals, one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Honduras ([NotiCen, Dec. 3](#),

2015, and [July 14, 2016](#)). He has also focused on maras, the violent street gangs that have become one of the country's top internal security headaches for the authorities.

During his period as head of Congress, Hernández successfully pushed for the creation of additional, mostly militarized police forces, including the Policía Militar de Orden Público (Public Order Military Police, PMOP), and the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (Intelligence Troop and Special Response Security Groups), whose acronym, TIGRES, spells the Spanish word for tigers.

The Hernández administration's anti-crime effort has been criticized by Honduran human rights and other grassroots organizations, but has also earned praise. In a report released a year ago, the specialized security news and analysis outlet InSight Crime wrote that "US military officials say has gone from being the number one transit country to fifth in the region since Hernández assumed office."

Before Hernández took office, "Honduras was the principal stopover point for international drug shipments...at the time, as much as 87% of all drug planes from South America were passing through Honduras," InSight Crime wrote. "In the past two years, however, the Hernández administration has delivered a brutal blow to some of the most powerful drug trafficking networks operating in Honduras" ([NotiCen, Feb. 6, 2014](#)).

Hernández says he needs more time to accomplish his goals. Thus, after Congress reformed the nation's Constitution, lifting the ban on re-election, he launched his candidacy for a new term.

Having won the PN's nomination during the party's March 12 primary vote, he is confident he will remain at the helm come Jan. 27, 2018.

His tough focus on security could be an asset in his effort. Two days before the PN held its primary election, Hernández spoke to the nation on radio and television, telling Hondurans that "to go after, capture, and punish the actors involved in drug trafficking, assets laundering, corruption, extortion, and extraditing several of those individuals when applicable is a show of political will and institutional strengthening."

And during a press conference held two days after winning the party's nomination, he said,

"Some people don't want to see me here, mainly criminals, organized crime." Hernández referred to what he described as the possibility of an attempt to pay "hitmen to disappear us from here," and emphasized that he would not give in, because the struggle against organized crime "is our commitment."

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