

# Venezuelan president's relatives indicted in US for cocaine smuggling

President Nicolás Maduro called arrests of first lady's nephews an 'imperialist ambush' as part of international campaign against country's socialist government

Reuters in Caracas

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Two of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro's relatives have been indicted in the US for cocaine smuggling, according to court papers on Thursday, following an international sting that Venezuela cast as an "imperialist" attack.

Franqui Francisco Flores de Freitas, 30, and Efraín Antonio Campo Flores, 29 - who are nephews of Maduro's wife and first lady Cilia Flores - were charged in a one-count indictment filed in federal court in Manhattan.

The two were arrested in Haiti and flown to New York on Tuesday, people familiar with the matter said. They were expected to appear in court later on Thursday.

The charge against them alleged that in October, the pair participated in meetings in Venezuela regarding a shipment of cocaine that was to be sent to the United States via Honduras.

The case is an embarrassment for Maduro, the 52-year-old successor to Hugo Chávez, as his ruling socialists head towards parliamentary elections in December.

The party faces the possibility of losing the National Assembly for the first time in the "Chavismo" movement's 16-year rule due to voter anger over economic crisis in the Opec member, which has been hit hard by falling oil prices.

Maduro and other senior officials have long said accusations of collusion with drug trafficking by the US are part of an international campaign to discredit socialism in Venezuela.

Flores, who was in Geneva on Thursday with Maduro as he addressed the United Nations human rights body, refused to speak to reporters seeking comment on her nephews. Maduro was in Geneva to defend Venezuela's human rights record after the top UN rights official voiced serious concerns about the country's judiciary and harassment of his critics.

Government officials point to scores of local arrests as evidence of their efforts to clamp down on the drug trade, but US investigators appear to be chasing a plethora of cases that allegedly involve Venezuelan officials.

"Neither attacks nor imperialist ambushes can harm the people of the liberators," tweeted Maduro, soon after news that the two Venezuelans had been whisked out of Haiti to New York.

“The fatherland will follow its course,” he added.

The pair had contacted an undercover US agent about selling 800kg (1,763lb) of cocaine, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing two sources familiar with the matter.

The two were arrested at a hotel in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, on Tuesday by anti-narcotics police at the request of US authorities, according to a senior Haitian official. They were flown out of the country accompanied by agents from the US Drug Enforcement Administration, the official said.

Mainstream media coverage of the affair in Venezuela was muted. The front page of two leading newspapers, which have softened their criticism of the government since recent changes of ownership, made no mention of Flores’s nephews.

Opposition critics, however, poked fun at the powerful first lady on Twitter. One digital mock-up put her face into an advert for the Spanish-language soap opera La Reina del Sur, which is about a female drug kingpin.

Another revamped the Coca-Cola logo to read “Coca-Flores”, with the government’s “Made in Socialism” seal added mockingly.

Flores, 62, called the “first combatant” by the president, is highly influential in her husband’s government. She was on the legal team of late socialist leader Chávez, working to secure his 1994 release from prison after a failed coup attempt.

In 2006, she became the first woman elected to lead the legislature, taking over that role from Maduro, and is registered as a candidate in the 6 December legislative elections.

The US State Department says more than half of the cocaine produced in neighboring Colombia moves through Venezuela toward Europe and the US.

The US Treasury has nine Venezuelan officials on a “kingpin” list, which bars those suspected of involvement in large-scale drug trafficking from the US financial system.

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