

World | Wed Dec 16, 2015 5:08am EST

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# Exclusive: U.S. to charge Venezuela's National Guard chief with drug trafficking

WASHINGTON | BY JULIA HARTE AND NATE RAYMOND



Nestor Reverol, the then-Director of the National Drug Office (ONA), talks to the media during a meeting in Caracas, January 11, 2010. REUTERS/CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS

U.S. prosecutors are preparing to unveil drug trafficking charges against the head of Venezuela's National Guard, according to people familiar with the case, as the United States investigates the suspected involvement of senior Venezuelan officials in the cocaine trade.

Nestor Reverol, the former head of Venezuela's anti-narcotics agency and a long-time ally of late socialist leader Hugo Chavez, is named in a sealed indictment pending in federal court in Brooklyn, New York, according to the people.

Reverol would be one of the highest-ranking Venezuelan officials to face U.S. drug charges. He could not be reached for comment by Reuters.

In recent years, he has rejected U.S. accusations that Venezuela has failed to curb illicit drug shipments and has touted the government's success in cracking down on the flow of cocaine from neighboring Colombia.

Also named in the U.S. indictment is Edylberto Molina, a former deputy head of the anti-narcotics agency and currently a military attache posted in Germany, a person familiar with the matter said.

The National Guard, which is the branch of the armed forces that controls Venezuela's borders, did not respond to an email seeking comment on Reverol and a National Guard press official contacted by telephone declined to comment.



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But the National Guard did issue a series of Tweets in Reverol's defense on Tuesday night using the hashtag #NestorReverolSoldierOfTheFatherland and saying he should be praised for capturing more than 100 drugs bosses.

"We reject the campaign from the fascist right against our Commander General," one said.

Venezuela's Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino also weighed in. "Stop the campaign to tarnish the Bolivarian Armed Forces and their leaders. Let the truth come out!" he tweeted.

Venezuela's Information Ministry did not respond to an emailed request for comment on the U.S. indictment.

It is unclear what the specific charges are against Reverol and Molina, or when they will be made public.

U.S. Justice Department spokesman Peter Carr and a spokesperson for Brooklyn U.S. Attorney Robert Capers, whose office is handling the case against Reverol, declined to comment. U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) spokesman Joseph Moses declined to comment.

U.S. prosecutors have unsealed indictments charging at least five former Venezuelan officials with drug trafficking crimes over the past four years, according to records from Florida and New York district courts.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro dismisses charges of official involvement in drug trafficking as an international right-wing campaign to discredit socialism in Venezuela.

His Socialist Party says drug interdiction efforts have improved since Venezuela expelled the DEA in 2005.

#### ACCUSATIONS

Venezuelan opposition leaders have for years accused high-level government officials of involvement in the drug trade or of turning a blind eye to the role of military officers in narcotics trafficking.

The U.S. State Department said in its annual narcotics control report this year that Venezuela has become one of the main transit routes for illegal drugs from South America due to the country's porous border with neighboring Colombia, its "weak judicial system, sporadic international counter narcotics cooperation, and permissive and corrupt environment."

Up to a quarter of all cocaine exported from South America in 2011 departed from Venezuela, according to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Members of Venezuela's National Guard have been heavily involved in the drug trade, according to Mike Vigil, the DEA's former chief of international operations.

"The National Guard has been key to opening up the doors into Venezuela for Colombian drug trafficking organizations and subversive groups," he said. "They have transformed Venezuela into a massive pipeline for cocaine into the United States and Europe."

Two other former officials with the National Guard have been indicted on U.S. drugs charges in recent years.

Relatives of Venezuelan first lady Cilia Flores have also been caught up in U.S. anti-drug-trafficking efforts.



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Two of her nephews, Franqui Francisco Flores de Freitas and Efrain Antonio Campo Flores, were arrested in Haiti last month and indicted in federal court in Manhattan on cocaine trafficking charges. Lawyers for the nephews did not immediately respond to requests for comment. They have previously said the pair would plead not guilty.

U.S. officials said those arrests were not an effort to go after Maduro's government but a case of U.S. law enforcement seeking to prosecute suspected wrongdoing.

(Editing by [Stuart Grudgings](#) and [Kieran Murray](#))



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