



## Cartel Kingpin or Not, Diosdado Revelation Unlikely to Dethrone

### Bodyguard's New York Revelations a Long Way from Caracas

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January 28, 2015

Hugo Chávez's former head of security, Leamsy Salazar, fled to the United States on Monday, January 26, and entered the DEA's witness protection program. According to *ABC* and *El Nuevo Herald*, Salazar will testify on the alleged criminal activities of National Assembly President Diosdado Cabello. Salazar claims Cabello is the leader of the Soles cartel, and says the group is made up of several Venezuelan army officers and politicians who control drug trafficking in the country.

The charges are significant, but will the United States be able to successfully prosecute *Chavismo*'s strongman? The historical record suggests it's unlikely.

William Brownfield, assistant secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and former US ambassador to Venezuela (2004-2007) and Colombia (2007-2010), could neither "confirm nor deny" a federal indictment against Cabello. However, he indicated that "historically, big international narcotics cases are usually tried in Florida's Southern District or in New York's Southern District," the latter being where Leamsy Salazar, according to *ABC*, will offer his testimony.

Given his power in Venezuela, Cabello's arrest is doubtful, says Cato Institute drug-war specialist and policy analyst Juan Carlos Hidalgo.

"I don't see how a DEA report involving him with drug smuggling could affect his position [in Venezuela], just like it didn't happen with other army officers that the United States singled out as drug lords in Venezuela," he told the *PanAm Post*.

However, if Leamsy Salazar's accusations are proven true, the political repercussions could be historical.

Venezuelan reporter Luz Mely Reyes said that a unilateral prosecution would not be enough to take down Cabello. "To involve the president of the National Assembly has huge political and legal implications. [But] one person's testimony is not enough to determine his culpability," she told the *PanAm Post*, adding that previous narcotics investigations in the United States have only targeted lower-rank officials.

Hidalgo believes Salazar's defection to the United States is more likely to provoke another round of anti-US rhetoric from Venezuelan officials, rather than any significant changes in government.

For his part, Cabello responded to the allegations via his Twitter account: "Every attack against me strengthens my spirit and commitment, [and] I immensely appreciate the people's display of solidarity."

Luz Mely Reyes expects the Venezuelan media to patiently wait for the results of the investigation. In 2014, after Aruba detained former military intelligence officer Hugo Carvajal at the United States's request, the Venezuelan official filed a defamation suit against seven journalists in the country who reported on the arrest.

### **Key Witness**

Lieutenant Commander Leamsy Salazar was Hugo Chávez's head of security for 10 years, and until December 2014 was Diosdado Cabello's right-hand man.

On Tuesday, Luz Mely Reyes reported Salazar left Venezuela for Madrid, Spain, presumably on his honeymoon days after getting married. However, according to Reyes's sources, the US State Department contacted Salazar in Europe, prior to him landing in New York.

*ABC's* investigation suggests Salazar will testify that the Soles cartel transports drugs produced by Colombia's FARC into Venezuela. Drug shipments then move through Venezuela, at times with the protection of the Cuban government, before making their way to the United States. Salazar also claims to have witnessed Cabello give explicit orders regarding a boat shipment holding several tons of cocaine.

### **"Mountains of Cash"**

The former bodyguard will also provide the DEA the exact location of the "mountains of dollars in cash" that Salazar says were gained from illicit drug trade.

Salazar's allegations have revived interest in a December 8 seizure of a truck filled with cash (US\$10 million) coming from the United States, just outside Puerto Cabello in Carabobo state, Venezuela. Just days after the incident, Diosdado Cabello said on national television that the money belonged to Venezuelan opposition leaders, but offered no evidence.

However, on Friday, January 23, the Public Prosecutor's Office made their first formal accusation in the case. Authorities charged 49-year-old Arquímedes José Rondón with criminal association and money laundering under the Law Against Organized Crime and Funding of Terrorism, in connection with \$4.2 million found in the truck.

Salazar's accusations then beg the question: where are the other \$6 million? Is the money somehow tied to the Soles cartel? Venezuela's justice system must swiftly address the case, demand transparency from government officials, and prosecute those involved. However, trust in the law has fallen so low, it wouldn't surprise me if those holding on to sensitive information are suddenly nowhere to be found.