



2.1.3. Pranes, sindicatos and sistemas

*Pranes*⁴⁴⁵ are prison-based gangs that originate and operate from within Venezuela's penitentiary system.⁴⁴⁶ Empowered and tolerated by authorities, they have exercised de facto control over numerous prisons, coordinating extortion, drug trafficking, and other criminal activities through inmate-run hierarchical structures.⁴⁴⁷ At the end of 2023, the government launched security operations aimed at dismantling the *pranato* system; however, most top criminal leaders escaped without resistance and relocated to continue their activities elsewhere.⁴⁴⁸ Following these raids, the *pranato* has reportedly been weakened and partially co-opted by police and military officials, who now charge fees in exchange for benefits such as smuggling drugs, mobile phones, and packages into prison facilities.⁴⁴⁹

Sindicatos originated as construction-sector unions⁴⁵⁰ but have since evolved into powerful armed groups that now control illegal mining operations.⁴⁵¹ Together with *pranes*, they oversee extensive criminal networks known as *sistemas*.⁴⁵² These structures, some comprising 'hundreds' of members, engage in extortion of mined gold, illegal mining, fuel and drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, and widespread extortion of local businesses.⁴⁵³ In El Callao, Bolívar state, for example, vendors reportedly pay monthly fees of 100 USD, while processing mills surrender 20 % of their gold as payment.⁴⁵⁴ Their operations have also expanded into Guyana, where they raid mining camps and extort river traffic.⁴⁵⁵

Las Claritas is one of the most powerful and long-standing *sindicatos* involved in illegal mining in Bolívar state.⁴⁵⁶ It is the only major group that has avoided security-force crackdowns, reportedly due to agreements with elements of the state.⁴⁵⁷ Las Claritas controls key mining areas, organises extraction operations, extorts miners and traders, and enforces strict authority over nearby towns, imposing its own rules and punishments.⁴⁵⁸ On 17 February 2025, a *sindicato* launched an attack on Guyanese forces along the Cuyuni River in the Essequibo region, wounding six Guyanese soldiers; Venezuelan authorities dismissed reports of the attack as 'fake news'.⁴⁵⁹

Sistemas maintain control through a combination of violence and selective philanthropy, using both executions and community projects to secure local loyalty.⁴⁶⁰ A newer armed group, the Hugo Chávez Frías Organisation, also known as the Socio-Revolutionary Movement, reportedly composed of former Colombian guerrillas and new recruits, has also begun charging payments from those travelling along the Cuyuni River into mining areas on both sides of the border.⁴⁶¹

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Pran stands for *Preso Rematado Asesino Nato* ('a hardened inmate, born killer'). CNN, Why Latin America's prisons create some of the world's deadliest gangs, 10 December 2025, [url](#)

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