Treasury Sanctions Ecuador’s Notorious Los Choneros Gang and Its Leader

February 7, 2024

WASHINGTON — Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned one of Ecuador’s most violent gangs, Los Choneros, and its leader, José Adolfo Macías Villamar (also known by the alias “Fito”), pursuant to counter narcotics authorities. OFAC’s action follows a steep rise in violence in Ecuador attributed to the actions of Los Choneros and other drug trafficking gangs in the country.

“Drug trafficking gangs such as Los Choneros, many with ties to powerful drug cartels in Mexico, threaten the lives and livelihoods of communities in Ecuador and throughout the region,” said Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E. Nelson. “We stand in support of Ecuador in its fight to combat drug trafficking, curb the proliferation of prison gangs and prison violence, and take back its streets.”

SITUATION IN ECUADOR

Ecuador is experiencing record levels of gang-driven violence, including the August 2023 assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, a January 2024 armed attack on a local TV network while it was broadcasting live, and the subsequent assassination of the prosecutor investigating that attack and widespread corruption. Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación have further fueled the violence by backing rival drug trafficking gangs within Ecuador as they battle to control trafficking routes in the country.

The latest wave of violence broke out in January 2024, just two days after the Government of Ecuador discovered José Adolfo Macías Villamar (Macías Villamar), the head of the Ecuadorian gang Los Choneros, missing from his prison cell—just ahead of his planned move to a maximum-security facility. In response to his escape, the Government of Ecuador declared a 60-day state of emergency, which sparked additional prison riots and gang attacks across the country, including kidnappings and bombings. On January 9, 2024, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa declared Ecuador to be in a state of internal armed conflict.

TARGETING A PROMINENT CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION

Los Choneros, one of Ecuador’s most violent criminal organizations, has been involved in drug trafficking in Ecuador since the 1990s and is a key driver of the escalating violence that has plagued Ecuador since 2020. Los Choneros has also been running operations from inside state and federal penitentiaries throughout the country. With support from the Sinaloa Cartel, Los Choneros gained control of key cocaine trafficking routes through Ecuador. In return, Los Choneros allegedly provided security and logistics services to the Sinaloa Cartel.

A wanted poster for Macías Villamar posted by the Government of Ecuador

Macías Villamar, also known by the alias “Fito,” is a founding member of Los Choneros and has been the group’s sole leader since 2020. In 2011, the Government of Ecuador sentenced him to 34 years in prison for crimes that included murder and drug trafficking. In prison, Macías Villamar enjoyed access to cell phones and internet, which enabled him to continue to direct the activities of Los Choneros and publish external communications, including a music video posted to social media challenging the Ecuadorian government.

OFAC designated Los Choneros and Macías Villamar pursuant to Executive Order 14059 for having engaged in, or attempted to engage in, activities or transactions that materially contributed to, or pose a significant risk of materially contributing to, the international proliferation of illicit drugs or their means of production.
Separately, a $5 million reward offer from the U.S. Department of State remains in place for information leading to the arrest or conviction of co-conspirators and masterminds behind the August 2023 assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio. The U.S. Department of State issued this reward on September 28, 2023, under the Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program. For more information, see this link.

**SANCTIONS IMPLICATIONS**

As a result of today's action, all property and interests in property of the designated persons described above that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons are blocked and must be reported to OFAC. In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, individually or in the aggregate, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked. Unless authorized by a general or specific license issued by OFAC, or exempt, OFAC’s regulations generally prohibit all transactions by U.S. persons or within (or transiting) the United States that involve any property or interests in property of designated or otherwise blocked persons. U.S. persons may face civil or criminal penalties for violations of Executive Order 14059.

Today’s action is part of a whole-of-government effort to counter the global threat posed by the trafficking of illicit drugs into the United States that is causing the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans annually, as well as countless more non-fatal overdoses. OFAC, in coordination with its U.S. government partners and foreign counterparts and in support of President Biden’s National Drug Control Strategy, will continue to target and pursue accountability for foreign illicit drug actors.

The power and integrity of OFAC sanctions derive not only from OFAC’s ability to designate and add persons to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List), but also from its willingness to remove persons from the SDN List consistent with the law. The ultimate goal of sanctions is not to punish, but to bring about a positive change in behavior. For information concerning the process for seeking removal from an OFAC list, including the SDN List, please refer to OFAC’s Frequently Asked Question 897 here. For detailed information on the process to submit a request for removal from an OFAC sanctions list, please click here.

For more information on the individual and entity designated today, click here.