

Nicaragua Paradise Lost

Bluefields: Nicaragua's Cocaine Hub

By Jeremy McDermott



The Nicaraguan city of Bluefields is a place where the narco-transporters rule, and cocaine floats off the coast and into the nightclubs.

There are no roads into Bluefields, the main city on Nicaragua's remote Caribbean coast, but the city and the surrounding region have nonetheless become a logistics and transportation hub

for the international drug trade.

Go-fast boats loaded with tons of north-bound cocaine move along the Caribbean shoreline from Colombia, finding logistical support and refuge in different spots on Nicaragua's eastern coast. Catering to those needs are a series of mostly home-grown criminal networks that have sprung up in the jungle-covered North Atlantic and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions (known as the RAAN and RAAS respectively).

Disputes among rival groups over the theft of merchandise have turned the once bucolic region into one of the country's deadliest. In 2010, the latest year for which statistics are available, the murder rate in the RAAS was 40 per 100,000, compared to 17 per 100,000 for Managua.

The violence has hit the security forces as well as civilians. In 2004, four policemen were assassinated in Bluefields by members of the so-called Reñazco gang.

These days, in this city of some 90,000 inhabitants, there are few secrets, and there's no question for locals about who's in charge.

"Frank Zeledon runs things in this town," said one taxi driver. After the driver had ascertained he was not being recorded and that his name would not be used, he agreed to point out Zeledon's palatial fortress, which is notorious for its wild parties.



Zeledon has a long police record, but he's never been charged with drug trafficking. Still, authorities have their eye on him.

Zeledon's luxury mansion, and a handful of others like it in town, provide stark contrast to the wooden or cinder block structures that house most of the locals.

Late model Cherokee Jeeps and gleaming white Land Rovers weave through the jalopies and beaten-up taxis.

Nicaraguan and international anti-narcotics investigators say Zeledon (pictured above) provides logistical support in and around Bluefields to a drug trafficking network run by Archibald Clayburn, known by locals as "Mr. Boney." Clayburn, a resident of Nicaragua's nearby Corn Island, owns a hotel, the investigators say.

Neither has been charged for drug trafficking, but international intelligence agencies said that Clayburn handles cocaine shipments coming via the Colombian island of San Andres. He then runs them through Zeledon's Bluefields-based network, which includes a shipyard that builds secret compartments into boats to hide drugs, as well as performing general boat maintenance.

Zeledon protects himself from prosecution in various ways. Norman Howard of the United Nations Development Program in Bluefields said that Zeledon was very active during local elections and that the candidates he supported invariably won, thanks in no small part to a healthy campaign budget.

Such is the power of Zeledon that when local police chief Manuel Zambrana arrested him in Bluefields in May last year for assaulting a pastor, brandishing a .38 to threaten the church leader, he spent just 12 hours in jail. Zambrana was transferred two weeks later to a Managua-based post.



Zambrana's removal reinforced the local perception that no honest policeman can survive here long, and that drug traffickers like Zeledon are protected from above. Zambrana had seemed to be trying to change that notion and earn the trust of the

local population, challenging the power of the traffickers by engineering a series of raids on nightclubs known to be local drug distribution points.

"Zambrana did something we had never seen before here in Bluefields," said one local resident named Marjorie, who preferred her last name be omitted. "He raided local discos, where they sell drugs to kids. He defied the big shots here. Of course he did not last long."

InSight Crime contacted Zambrana, but he refused to comment on the case. Police chief Granera told InSight Crime that Zambrana's removal from Bluefields "coincided with a restructuring that we were doing ... It had nothing to do with imprisoning Frank Zeledon."

Zeledon is just one of a number of operators who have staging and logistics posts along Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, most of them well known to the locals. These provide an array of services to the international trafficking chain.

The first is fuel resupply to the go-fast launches that move northwards up the Caribbean coast, principally feeding the Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) which move drug shipments to the US mainland. These boats, which can have up to five outboard engines, are faster than almost anything the interdiction forces have in their navies. What's more, they normally travel at night and are difficult to find on radar.



Secondly, international traffickers rely on the Nicaraguan networks to hide the boats, repair or maintain them when necessary, and entertain the crew during the daylight hours. Captain Blas Hernandez Mendoza of the Atlantic Naval District (DNA) told InSight Crime that drug shipments will often be transferred in

Nicaragua from go-fast boats to fishing vessels or vice versa; others are offloaded and broken down into smaller consignments -- anything to keep the security forces guessing. Loads will also often be held in secret deposits along the coast, waiting out naval operations.

Thirdly, the Nicaraguan gangs provide intelligence, using networks of fishermen and spies to track the movement of naval vessels and security forces, and clearing the path for the drug loads. So-called "watchmen" live on the edges of the bases, reporting the movement of ships and other official seafaring vessels.

There are also whispers of people on the take within the naval base, with enough access to report on the movements of US ships that patrol the waters of the Caribbean in joint operations. Up to \$4 million in cash seized from drug traffickers by the navy "disappeared" in 2009, according to Gerardo Suarez, who until February 2012 was the chief prosecutor in the RAAS, and remains one of the few willing to go on the record about trafficking activities in the area.

Suarez spent much of his time in the RAAS pursuing a gang that operated in the southern part of the autonomous region, known as the "Tarzanes." There, far to the south of Bluefields, near San Juan del Norte, the Tarzanes operate in the remote jungles and tributaries along the border with Costa Rica. The gang is built around the Reyes Aragon family, and there are arrest warrants pending for seven members of the clan. Suarez said that as well as drug trafficking, the gang has been involved in arms smuggling and a series of homicides, including the infamous killing of four policemen in Bluefields in 2004.

To the north of Bluefields, around Sandy Bay, the border that separates the RAAS and the RAAN, a powerful drug trafficking network is run by Donly Mendoza (pictured below, right). Police sources stated that Mendoza moves with a group of up to 40 bodyguards and works with both Honduran and Mexican TCOs. In January this year, security forces launched an operation to capture Mendoza in Sandy Bay, after a shootout between rival traffickers left four wounded. While seven arrests were made and arms seized, Mendoza was not to be found.

Still further north, toward the Honduras border, there is a criminal network led by a Colombian, who has a Nicaraguan identity card in the name of Alberto Ruiz Cano. His real name is Amauri Carmona Morelos, from San Andres (pictured below) and his father is believed to have once worked for Colombia's Cali Cartel, schooling his son in the world of international drug trafficking.

Carmona Morelos formerly owned the notorious Mr. Sponge nightclub in Managua, which he used to launder drug money and as a meeting point to negotiate the movement and purchase of drug shipments. His base of operations is Walpa Siksa in the RAAN, but he is believed to move continually in and out of Honduras and back to his native San Andres, Colombia, international intelligence sources told InSight Crime.

Many of the Nicaraguan traffickers started as fishermen of "white lobsters," the bales of cocaine shipments that wash up on the shores after traffickers are forced to offload them while being pursued by security forces. They established contact with traffickers when the latter come to buy back the loads. Locals insist they have been paid up to \$500 a kilo for cocaine they found, a small fortune in these remote communities, whose only local employment opportunities, apart from drugs, come from fishing and logging.



"You need to understand that most of the local population in the RAAS, particularly in the more remote coastal communities, support the drug traffickers," said government prosecutor Suarez. "They provide employment, and when there are storms and hurricanes, it is the drug traffickers that help people rebuild, not the government, which has little to no presence."

This was echoed by Captain Jose Castillo of the DNA, who said that, due to extreme poverty, "It is easy for drug traffickers to buy these communities."

While some pick up the loads, others cut their criminal teeth as "tumbadores," groups of heavily armed pirates, who steal drug loads from transporters and sell them, usually in Honduras.

Throughout the chain, many of these transporters are paid for their services in cocaine to sell on the domestic market. Nicaraguan authorities believe this is the case with Zeledon, who sells his merchandise in small dosages locally. This would have given him ample reason to push for Zambrana's ouster as police chief.

"He [Zambrana] didn't let them work," one businessman was quoted in La Prensa as saying about the nightclubs where Zeledon conducts much of his business.

"He was a goody-two-shoes," another added.

Of course, "goody-two-shoes" is a relative term in these parts. What's more, Zambrana seems to realize something many local "businessmen" do not: today's small-time movers may be tomorrow's national security problem. To be sure, as pressure grows in other parts of Central America, as well as Mexico and Colombia, the importance of Nicaragua as a transshipment point is likely to increase, and this will have one of two results: either TCOs will set up shop here, or they will increase the participation of local criminal syndicates in the drug world, helping them make the leap to become transnational gangs themselves.

**Additional reporting by Steven Dudley. Graphics by Andres Ortiz Sedano.*

An Interview with Nicaragua's Police Chief

By Steven Dudley



Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and has the smallest police force, yet its murder rate is the lowest in the region, and its police are seen as a model for others. On June 19, InSight Crime interviewed national police chief Aminta Granera about the challenges facing the region and her country.

InSight Crime: Central America has seen crime and murder rates skyrocket in recent years. Why do you think that has happened?

Aminta Granera: Well, in Central America, we must distinguish the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras) from the Southern Triangle (Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama). In the Northern Triangle, I think Mexico's effort has caused a shift of the Zetas and the Mexican cartels, which are already established in Guatemala. In El Salvador and Honduras, [this presence] has been increasing. Honduras is the country with the world's highest homicide rate. The maras [street gangs] have a lot to do with this. In the Southern Triangle, we have a homicide rate much lower than the Northern Triangle. However, according to a study conducted by the University of Costa Rica, the homicide rates of Costa Rica and Panama have doubled in the last four years. The only country that has remained stable and even declined in recent years has been Nicaragua. I think that has to do, to a large extent, with the police model.

IC: What does that mean?

AG: Our police model is determined by our origins. Coming from a revolution, coming from a people, has branded us the Nicaraguan police. What I mean is that we are part of the community. [We have] a great respect for the people, a willingness to make sacrifices because we are putting on these uniforms because of the sacrifices of others who died -- friends, relatives -- so we could put on these uniforms and serve our people. So that's how we are marked by our roots. The police model here is preventive, proactive, deeply connected to the community. We are only 14,000 police in uniform, but we work with 100,000 people who form an organized, voluntary service with the police, to ensure their own safety. And this closeness with the community, the mutual respect [and] the public's confidence in their police, I think dates back to our origins.

IC: Nicaragua has far fewer gangs, gang members and gang violence than its neighbors. How did Nicaragua keep the gangs at bay?

AG: I would say that we had a sort of 10-year head start over other countries in Central America. I remember in the middle of 1985, we had the first meeting, the Nicaraguan police chiefs, where we were wondering what was going on in Honduras, because the first gangs in Honduras were appearing. We did not have them, and we said to ourselves, "Why don't we?" And we saw, well, young people at that time were involved in Nicaraguan literacy campaigns; vaccinations were going on; they were picking cotton, picking coffee; they were in the military. There was no room for Nicaraguan youth to engage in criminal activity or gangs.

Ten years later, in the mid 1990s, we started getting our first gangs (we don't call them "maras"). And we met again, the same bosses, which is another advantage we have: the Nicaraguan National Police Command has continuity. We said, "How are we going to face up to this?" I remember in Honduras they were tackling it with zero tolerance, and for every gang member that they threw into prison, they would put a head, literally the head of a police officer or a person, in the park across from the presidential palace. And we said, if 10 years ago the reason why our young people were not in gangs was that they formed part of the state program, then the key word and the antidote for gangs is inclusion. And we are going to treat them with inclusion rather than repression. And we created a youth program section. We worked it the other way as well. Our intelligence agencies also penetrated them. We could tell whether they had links with foreign gangs. If they were armed or not. We could see if they were criminals, or they were just excluded from the labor market, cultural, student or even family life. We could see if they joined the gangs because they had no other reference point. We currently have 10,000 youths who have demobilized as part of the 100,000 people who voluntarily work with us. They have surrendered their weapons and are committed to the police.

IC: Which foreign criminal groups operate in Nicaragua?

AG: The cartel that had the most presence was the Sinaloa Cartel, which operated on the Pacific Coast. That's the one we hit the hardest. All of its social base -- all the Nicaraguans and Mexicans -- are in the Nicaraguan jail system now. We have an area along the Atlantic Coast where a Colombian group operates. The Gulf Cartel also operates along the Atlantic. And that's it. It's a constant battle we have. How do they operate? They need a base to fill their go-fast boats up with gasoline, then go. They need to have properties in unpopulated areas where they can build runways, land their planes, fill up with gasoline and continue. Because this isn't a destination, it's a stopover. So that's what the locals and internationals do: refuel, monitor the authorities, and allow safe passage.

IC: How does Nicaragua approach the "war on drugs"?

AG: We have worked hard in two directions, and perhaps this differentiates us from other countries. In the early years, we were more concerned with drug

seizures. We seized an average of 15 to 20 tons of cocaine annually. Eventually we said, "This is not working because the guy who moves drugs through your territory is leaving you, and fostering corruption, destroying your society, breaking apart the family, corrupting youth, destroying your institutions." So we decided to [do] more than just drug seizures. It's much more important to break apart the social base, the logistical base that the Mexican cartels, and to a lesser extent the Colombian cartels, have in our territory than it is to seize X amount of cocaine or X amount of dollars that was making its way from the north to pay for the drugs. So we've spent a lot more time focusing on destroying the cells, the logistical support.

What matters most is that we in Nicaragua have said [to the drug traffickers]: "Look, we are not afraid. We are not intimidated. With us, you're not going to have your way. You're not going to be able to buy us." And we've shown them with our actions. We are David making war with Goliath, and wherever they open the door we are going to be there and strike them hard.

**Transcription and additional reporting by Kelly Walbert.*

Folk Singer's Death Shines Light on Nicaragua Police Corruption

By Steven Dudley



The investigation into the July 2011 murder of Argentine folk singer Facundo Cabral has unveiled a devious criminal network based in Nicaragua -- a country that many consider a model for avoiding high-level mafia infiltration -- which may involve the country's celebrated police force.

At 5 a.m. on July 9, 2011, legendary Argentine folk singer Facundo Cabral checked out of the Tikal Hotel in Guatemala City and got into a white Range Rover to go to the airport. His driver was Henry Fariñas (pictured above), a Nicaraguan nightclub owner and promoter who had organized some of Cabral's concerts in Nicaragua.

Cabral (pictured right) could not have been surprised that in Guatemala, one of the most violent places in the world, Fariñas showed up with two bodyguards at that dark hour of the morning. After 40 years on the road, the 74-year-old singer was probably used to mysterious sponsors and dangerous places.

Still, Fariñas was beyond murky. Elite, Fariñas' international chain of strip clubs, is known to host a dubious combination of illicit businessmen, shady politicians, and dodgy police. His name, and his club, had been attached to investigations into human trafficking.



The bodyguards made way for Cabral's soundman to ride in their Chevy Tahoe, which trailed behind Fariñas' Range Rover. Cabral rode shotgun, next to Fariñas who was driving. Cabral's manager was in the backseat. About a kilometer from the airport, a Hyundai Jeep pulled up on the driver's side of Fariñas' car; two men leaned out from the windows and opened fire. Cabral and Fariñas were hit, and Fariñas swerved off the road toward a fire station by the side of the avenue (See photo below).

Fariñas' bodyguards shot back from their vehicle, blowing out the back window of the Hyundai and injuring one of the hitmen. The assassins sped off, and Fariñas'

bodyguards gave chase for a few blocks before returning to help their boss. By the time they returned, Cabral was dead. Fariñas was taken to a local hospital in critical condition but survived.



It was appropriate that the music of Cabral, one of the region's most beloved artists, broke the case open. When one of the assassins heard on the news they'd killed the Argentine singer, he repented and turned himself in. He then told police where to find the Hyundai they'd abandoned on the side of a highway. With one participant in custody, the evidence from the car and video footage from the area surrounding the crime, Guatemalan authorities tracked down and arrested three more suspects that week.

They have since captured another.

All five assassins are Guatemalan, but the Guatemalan government immediately said it was an international crime. In a press conference following the arrests, Guatemalan Interior Minister Carlos Menocal said someone from an "unidentified" Central American country had contacted via Blackberry messenger the lead Guatemalan assassin, who planned the attack using his network of car thieves and hitmen. The assassins identified the man as Alejandro Jimenez, alias "El Palidejo." The target, Menocal emphasized, was the Nicaraguan Fariñas, not the Argentine Cabral.

The investigation has since involved prosecutors from as many as five governments, connecting underworld activities from Mexico to Colombia. Untangling this web gives us a clue as to why one of Latin America's most cherished artists was assassinated, and how one of the region's most celebrated police forces may be involved.

An International Network

Fariñas spent months in a Guatemalan hospital recovering from injuries suffered from the July attack. During that time, Nicaraguan officials quietly built a case against him. When he returned to Managua this past March, he was immediately arrested and charged with drug trafficking and money laundering. Police chief Aminta Granera told InSight Crime that Fariñas is also being investigated for human trafficking.

"It's all mixed into a confusing knot that we are trying to untangle," Granera said. "We started with Fariñas and now we have three different groups that trafficked drugs, and among them is a judge from the electoral council [who] moved money, [and] fabricated IDs."

The judge, Julio Cesar Osuna, was captured with 10 others in May, including Fariñas' sister, Karla Fariñas. A brother, Pedro Joaquin, is also among those in custody. Osuna is charged with providing the organization with false documents and is also being investigated for money laundering, Granera said.

The Farinas' crew, dubbed the "Charros," appears to be part of a classic Central American transport group. Using high-level government contacts, they move illicit drugs and people north, and help launder the proceeds back south. That network moved vast amounts of illicit goods for the feared Colombian group the Rastrojos north to the Mexican organizations, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Familia Michoacana: Guatemalan authorities said they had seen money transfers of up to \$700,000 in Farinas' accounts.

Fariñas' partner in Costa Rica was Jimenez, alias "El Palidejo." Both men have similar, humble backgrounds. Until Cabral's shooting, Fariñas (pictured right) was unknown in Nicaragua. Fariñas' father was a mechanic who fixed cars for government officials and the police, his mother told El Confidencial. It's not known how Fariñas became a club owner, but he allegedly began his career in entertainment by fixing musical instruments, specifically pianos.



For his part, Jimenez's only known legitimate business is a fruit stand that he ran from a suburb of San Jose. Following Cabral's assassination, Costa Rican authorities raided a number of properties related to Jimenez (pictured below, left), unraveling a regional network of his own that stretches from Panama to Guatemala. A Costa Rican investigator told InSight Crime that Jimenez used his parents and his wife as third party owners to camouflage his holdings, which in the seizure included cars and properties totaling approximately \$2.5 million.

Among Fariñas' and Jimenez's joint business interests is Elite. The club is a real-life version of the Bada Bing in "The Sopranos," a chain of strip clubs where business can be discussed and carried out in peace. Authorities could not say when or under what circumstances Jimenez entered into the nightclub business with Fariñas, but Fariñas, in testimony to the Guatemalan authorities, claimed the club was at the heart of a dispute between the two men, which led to the death of Cabral.



Testifying via videoconference from his hospital bed in Guatemala City before he was sent back to Nicaragua, Fariñas said that Jimenez was trying to force him to sell Elite in Costa Rica to Jimenez. However, Fariñas claimed he would only sell Jimenez a piece of the club, which made the Costa Rican angry. That, he said, was the motive behind the

attack that led to Cabral's tragic death.

In March, charged the Costa Rican with drug trafficking.

'Tumbadores,' Police and a Widening Circle of Co-conspirators

Given the nature of his business, Fariñas' story offered an unlikely explanation of the reason for such a violent confrontation, and investigators in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Costa Rica all told InSight Crime that the dispute is connected to the two men's illicit activities. These included trafficking cocaine and humans, as well as money laundering, Nicaraguan authorities believe. However, among the theories about the attack, the most likely one may be theft. In other words, it seems that Fariñas might have simply stolen from his partner.

For Nicaragua, a place with less value than many of its neighbors for trafficking groups, so-called "tumbes," or thefts, have become one of the prime ways of making money from the drug trade and one of the principal sources of conflict. Several of the country's largest criminal groups double as "tumbadores." Tumbadores frequently steal then resell the merchandise, sometimes to the same group that they have just robbed.



These groups often include policemen. For police, it is a natural fit. They seize drugs and cash regularly and can report it or not, depending on the price the

traffickers offer to obtain their drugs in return. Two former Guatemalan police chiefs, for instance, were arrested for connections to tumbadores rings, although one has since been released.

These rings reach into high circles. A US cable released by the whistleblower site WikiLeaks said that the top level of the ruling party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), used seized drug trafficking proceeds to pay off judges so they would release accused traffickers from jail. In one case chronicled in the cable, the proceeds were from a \$609,000 seizure.

Problems with tumbes also frequently stretch across borders. In 2008, suspected traffickers stopped a Nicaraguan tour bus in Guatemala, and killed the 15 Nicaraguans and one Dutchman aboard. The motive for the attack, authorities said, was that traffickers believed that a drug shipment that had been stolen from them was on the bus. One of the suspects in the case was carrying a pistol with the engraving, "Nicaraguan National Police."

The Cabral and Fariñas case may be connected to a tumbre scheme. Nicaragua's police chief Granera told La Prensa that one theory regarding the assault was that it was the result of a tumbre. When InSight Crime asked about this, Granera said she did not want to go into detail for fear of impeding the investigation.

But according to a top level Nicaraguan policeman, who spoke to InSight Crime on the condition that his identity be concealed, Fariñas worked closely with dirty Nicaraguan policemen involved in tumbes. One of these policemen, he said, was Carlos Palacios, who up until his retirement in May was on the police's board of directors and at one point ran the police's intelligence branch.

Their scheme, the policeman said, was for Fariñas to pose as a buyer. When the police seized the drugs using Fariñas' information on the cargo, Fariñas would claim ignorance about the operation, then keep a portion of the seized drugs for resale while the police would sell the rest.

The theory is not a stretch. Fariñas has a long relationship with Palacios and the police. After his arrest, Fariñas' mother told El Confidencial that Palacios was godfather to one of his children. She said her son had paid for the restoration of a police station in Managua, and that he'd sponsored the police soccer team.

According to the high-level Nicaraguan policeman, international counterdrug officials and Nicaraguan journalists, Elite is also frequented by top police and public officials, including Palacios. When asked recently about his relationship with Fariñas, Palacios got tense and denied the two were "compadres" (friends) in any sense of the word.

"I've known him for about nine years or so," the former police commander told the local press as they surrounded him outside his retirement ceremony. "If I had

information that someone was committing a crime, of course I would not have a relationship (with that person)."

Granera confirmed the two men played soccer together and that Fariñas sponsored Palacios' police team. She added that other policemen may have fraternized with Farinas' family and gone to his club, offering no defense or apologies for any of their activities.

"Just because you go to the Elite Club, does that mean you are a criminal working with Fariñas?" she asked. "Not necessarily."

Following the attack on Cabral, La Prensa newspaper explored the tumber angle as well. The reports, quoting unnamed sources, said that Fariñas worked with someone whose alias was "El Bigoton," or "The Mustache." One policeman identified Fariñas as an "informant," i.e., the source of information regarding shipments to be intercepted. La Prensa does not identify El Bigoton. The policeman told InSight Crime that El Bigoton was Palacios, but he offered no proof.

"Carlos has a mustache," police chief Granera said when asked by InSight Crime about Palacios' supposed alias. "But I can't tell you if that means he's related to the crimes of Fariñas and 'Palidejo.'"

Granera would not say whether the police was investigating Palacios, but the US government certainly had its suspicions about him prior to Cabral's death. "Palacios is an Ortega loyalist who has alleged, albeit unproven, ties to organized crime and corruption in Nicaragua," a 2008 US cable, released by WikiLeaks, said.

A later cable is more explicit. Citing a former Sandinista source, it says, "Police Commissioner Carlos Palacios is a corrupt FSLN hard-liner whose role is to keep Police Chief Aminta Granera in line with compromising information [about her] he reportedly possesses."

In the interview with InSight Crime, Granera, who is more popular than President Daniel Ortega, seemed rattled by this talk of corruption and police-engineered tumbes.

"I think they are isolated cases," she said, "And the cases have gone to court."

And there are indications that the Fariñas case, which has yet to go to trial, may be quietly settled, away from public scrutiny, precisely because of the numerous connections the Fariñas family maintains. Among Henry Fariñas' defenders when Guatemalan authorities said he was target of the attack was Alba Luz Ramos, president of Nicaragua's Supreme Court.

The Fariñas family's relationship with the police also appears deeper than just the occasional meeting at a strip club or a soccer pitch. As the noose around Henry Fariñas' neck tightened via public declarations of his connections to international

trafficking networks, the family released photos of Fariñas' sister Karla fraternizing with another police commander, in what appeared to be an attempt to send a message that prosecuting them may have embarrassing consequences for more than one police official.

To be sure, in this case, it may be the police that have the most to lose. Lauded regionwide for their community service approach and ability to keep organized crime at bay, the Cabral murder case provides a new, more disturbing possible narrative: that Nicaragua has less violence than its neighbors not because it has a more effective police force but because organized crime is a top-down business, controlled by the very authorities who are supposed to be fighting it.

**Additional reporting by Jeremy McDermott. Graphics by Andres Ortiz Sedano.*