

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024033287459 The Honduras government, working closely with US authorities, has cracked down on one of Honduras' largest drug transport organizations, the Cachiros, seizing properties and businesses and in the process painting a picture of a group whose reach may extend to Honduras' political and possibly its financial elite. Honduras police and military have identified 61 properties, 4 commercial establishments, and 24 vehicles in two provinces for seizure, as well as 64 dollar and lempira bank accounts to be frozen at the US Treasury Department's behest, La Prensa reported. The US Treasury estimated the value of the assets at \$500 million, the newspaper said. In a statement, the Treasury said the Cachiros is headed by Javier and Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, and its members include their father, Santos Isidro Rivera Cardona, mother, Esperanza Caridad Maradiaga Lopez, sister, Maira Lizeth Rivera Maradiaga, and brother, Santos Isidro Rivera Maradiaga. They do not face charges in Honduras and no formal indictment has been released in the United States. As opposed to its July 1 statement, in which it named the group as "specially designated narcotics traffickers" without providing details, the Treasury this time identified several companies the group controls, among them a mining operation, a cattle ranch, an African Palm oil processor and a zoo. An anonymous Treasury source told El Heraldo that there were "dozens" of companies and proxies laundering money for the organization. The money comes from the group's lucrative drug trafficking business, which the Treasury detailed in its statement. "Los Cachiros coordinates the movement of drugs to and from Honduras for Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations, including the Sinaloa Cartel," the Treasury said. "Los Cachiros employs land, air, and sea conveyances in its movement of drugs, and its activities have been linked to seizures of cocaine in Central America. It is reported that Los Cachiros controls 90 percent of the clandestine airstrips in Honduras, and it uses these airstrips to facilitate the entry of drugs into Honduras and Guatemala." InSight Crime Analysis If you look at the organizational chart provided by the Treasury (see below, or for complete version see attachment), you might mistake this group for a small, rural band of gangsters. But this organization has deep contacts in the country's elite that keep their money safe and the judicial authorities at bay. It also has a distribution network that stretches into three countries. At least part of their reach came to light in a cable released by Wikileaks in which outgoing Ambassador Charles Ford spoke candidly about then President Manuel Zelaya. In the cable, Ford talks of ways in which criminal groups "have pressured [Zelaya] to name one of their own" to a high level post in the Security Ministry. One of those groups was presumably the Cachiros, who, when their candidate was not selected, took it personally. Senator Juan Ramon Salgado Cuevas was assassinated shortly thereafter, and Honduran intelligence told InSight Crime it was because Salgado had failed to secure the Cachiros' candidate for the ministry job. The Treasury also does not mention the family's possible link to the Tocoa soccer club, Real Sociedad Municipal, whose players wear on their chests the logo of Joya Grande, the zoo in question, and whose ownership has been tied to the Cachiros. The club counts Banco Continental — a company managed by one of the country's wealthiest families — as one of its other sponsors. The support has worked. The club has moved to the first division where it is considered one of the best teams. The Treasury does make reference to the distribution chain, noting that Nicaraguan authorities arrested Nicaraguan national and alleged Cachiros associate Bismarck Antonio Lira Jiron last August. He remains in custody in Nicaragua, facing charges of drug trafficking with the Cachiros to the north and the Norte del Valle Cartel in Colombia to the south. However, the Cachiros main contacts are along the Guatemala – Honduras border where they can pass cocaine to their Guatemalan and Mexican counterparts, collecting about \$2,000 per kilo. If it is true that they control 90 percent of the air traffic coming through Honduras, then that would make some healthy profits. By InSight Crime's estimates, the family grosses up to \$4 million per month from its trafficking operations, which are concentrated in the Colon province. The Cachiros are the second large organization from Honduras that the US Treasury has outed in recent months. The other is led by Jose Miguel "Chepe" Handal Perez, a politician and businessman operating from San Pedro Sula, who is at large after the US added him to the same list the Cachiros made in July. As they did with Handal, Honduran authorities have declared that battle is being waged. The head of the Senate's banking committee called on banks to stop doing business with money launderers; a frontrunner in November's presidential elections said all candidates should "abstain from using dirty money." But sincerity is in short supply in Honduras. Santos Isidro Rivera was arrested briefly earlier this year on weapons charges but released. Leonel was arrested in 2011, but also

released. The Honduran state has largely collapsed, leaving a rich stew of corruption and drug trafficking, which is now boiling over. Witness the fact that the Cachiros have a road construction business, the perfect way to feed corrupt politicians and launder illicit proceeds at the same time. Drug traffickers still appear to fear the United States, especially the prospect of extradition, which the Honduras government recently green-lighted. However, only one person, who was not a Honduran, has been extradited since, and while the United States is pressuring the Honduran government to start capturing and extraditing local suspects, the subject appears to be too sensitive, especially with presidential elections coming. To be sure, the United States, despite providing millions in support for the security and judicial authorities in Honduras, seems to have run out of ways to pressure the Honduran state to reform its own institutions and to take action on its own. And while efforts such as the move to tackle the Cachiros are an important first step, they came at the behest of a powerful outsider, not a reform-minded, courageous Honduran seeking to change the direction of this nation. The research presented in this article is, in part, the result of a project funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Its content is not necessarily a reflection of the positions of the IDRC. The ideas, thoughts and opinions contained in this document are those of the author or authors.