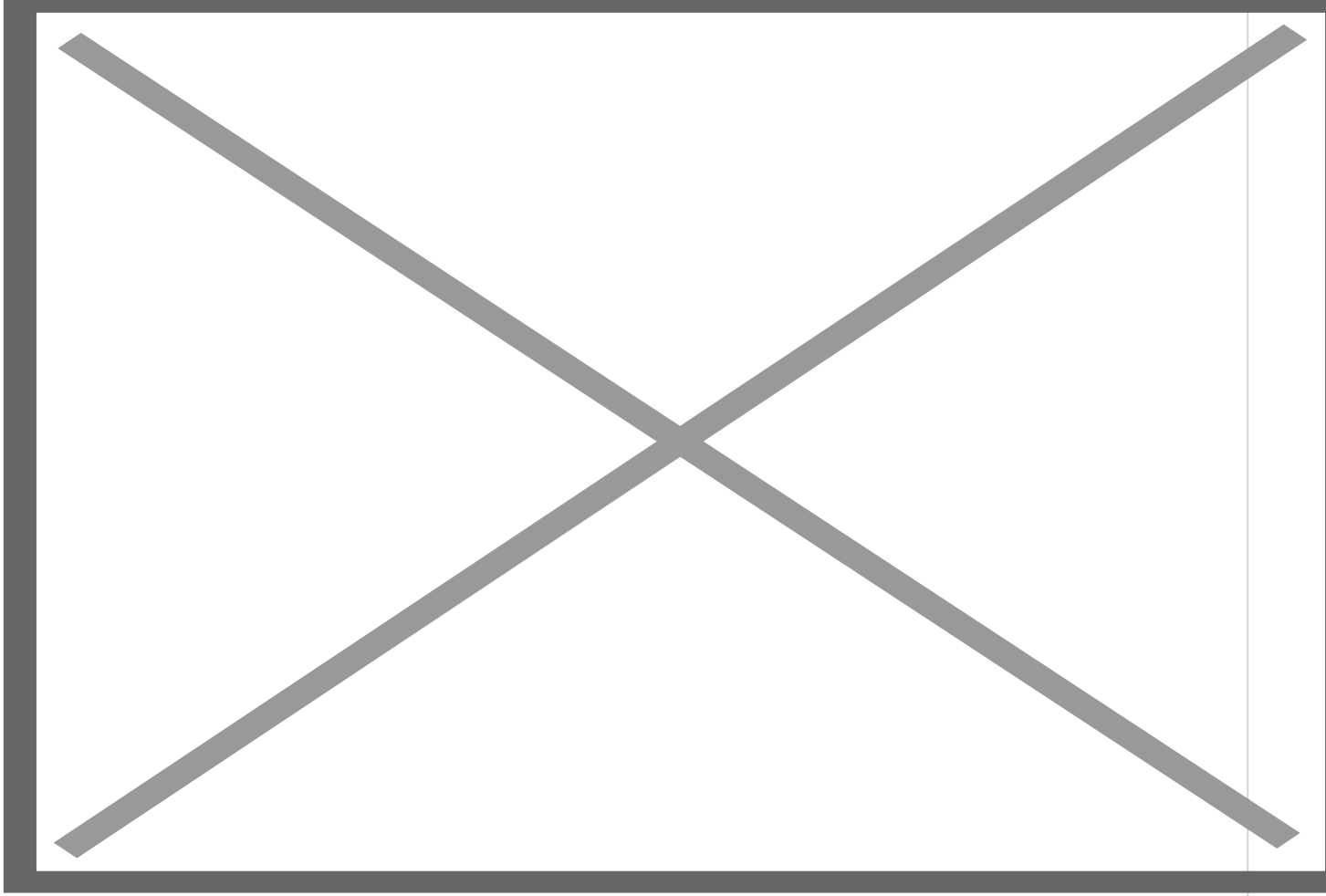


# *Venezuelan police move in on gang-run Caracas neighbourhoods*

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**Clashes between gang members and security forces erupted earlier this week [AFP]**

Caracas, July 10 (RHC)--Venezuelan security forces have intensified operations against criminal gangs in several residential areas in southwest Caracas. According to Prensa Latina news agency, the gangs have a long record of actions against peace and national stability.

Between Wednesday and Thursday, the Venezuelan government deployed hundreds of police and special forces troops to dislodge criminal groups that had consolidated positions in the sectors of Cota 905 and La Vega, and generated repeated episodes of violence.

After two days of heavy shootings, law enforcement agents managed to get inside “Cota 905” shantytown on Friday. “We control the area but there may still be a few snipers,” an officer told the AFP news agency.

The Cota 905 neighbourhood is the main zone of influence of the so-called Koki gang, which faced law enforcement agents with guns several times this year. Although the leaders of Koki have so far evaded the police siege, the government of President Nicolas Maduro affirmed on Friday that the dismantling of this criminal organization is under way.

On Thursday, the authorities had issued search warrants and offered rewards of up to \$500,000 for gang bosses behind the deadly clashes but now on the run. In the parts controlled by the gang, the ground was littered on Friday with bullet casings, evidence of thousands of shots fired in two days, according to images on social media.

Interior Minister Carmen Melendez tweeted that police have “advanced in the dismantling of the criminal structures that have settled in these territories with the intention of sowing terror.”

The government blames the violence on a plot by the opposition to “destabilise” Maduro. On Twitter, the Venezuelan president wrote: “The enemies of the Homeland intend to sow anxiety through the financing of criminal gangs, we will not sit idly by. We are acting forcefully, adhering to the laws.”

About 800 security personnel were deployed as part of the operation, searching pedestrians and homes, and seizing cars, motorcycles and barrels of diesel thought to belong to the gangs.

In June, similar clashes killed at least three people, including a nurse who fell victim to a stray bullet. In 2020, Venezuela registered 12,000 violent deaths, according to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory. This is a rate of 45.6 per 100,000 inhabitants – seven times higher than the global average.

Other acts of violence carried out by these organized crime groups have coincided with threats to Venezuela's sovereignty, such as the frustrated Operation Gideon in May 2020, aimed at assassinating the Venezuelan president and carry out a coup d'état, or the recent incursion of Colombian paramilitaries in the state of Apure.

In addition, President Nicolás Maduro recently revealed the existence of new violent plans against the Venezuelan State organized in Washington and Miami. Maduro said that the recent visits to Colombia by the head of the U.S. Southern Command, Craig Faller, and of the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), William Burns, respond to a plan to kill members of the high political and military command of the South American nation.

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