

US Company that Smuggled Weapons into Venezuela Is Linked to CIA 'Black Site' Renditions

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Last week, Venezuelan authorities claimed a US plane smuggled in a small cache of weapons and ammo, and accused the US government for the illicit cargo, and seeking to arm opposition groups to topple the current Maduro-led government. The plane, operated by 21 Air, had begun flying into Columbia and Venezuela daily, starting in January. Two top executives at 21 Air, Adolpho Moreno and Michael Steinke, have “either coincidental or direct ties” to Gemini Air Cargo, a company previously named by Amnesty International as one of the air charter services involved in a CIA rendition program. Critics of America’s involvement in Venezuela have compared the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s, when Elliot Abrams, the the newly appointed special envoy overseeing policy toward Venezuela, funneled weapons to the Contras in humanitarian aid shipments.

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA – Two executives at the company that chartered the U.S. plane that was caught smuggling weapons into Venezuela last week have been tied to an air cargo company that aided the CIA in the rendition of alleged terrorists to “black site” centers for interrogation. The troubling revelation comes as Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has rejected a U.S. “humanitarian aid” convoy over concerns that it could contain weapons meant to arm the country’s U.S.-backed opposition.

Last Tuesday, Venezuelan authorities **announced** that 19 rifles, 118 ammo magazines, 90 radios and six iPhones had been smuggled into the country via a U.S. plane that had originated in Miami. The authorities blamed the United States government for the illicit cargo, accusing it of seeking to arm U.S.-funded opposition groups in the country in order to topple the current Maduro-led government.

A [subsequent investigation](#) into the plane responsible for the weapons caché conducted by *McClatchyDC*

received very little media attention despite the fact that it uncovered information clearly showing that the plane responsible for the shipment had been making an unusually high number of trips to Venezuela and neighboring Colombia over the past few weeks.

Steffan Watkins, an Ottawa-based analyst, told *McClatchy* in a telephone interview that the plane, which is operated by U.S. air cargo company [21 Air](#), had been “flying between Philadelphia and Miami and all over the place, but all continental U.S.” during all of last year. However, Watkins noted that “all of a sudden in January, things changed” when the plane began making trips to Colombia and Venezuela on a daily basis, sometimes multiple times a day.

According to Watkins’ analysis, this single plane had conducted 40 round-trip flights from Miami International Airport to Caracas and Valencia – where the smuggled weapons had been discovered – in Venezuela, as well as to Bogota and Medellin in Colombia in just the past month.

[Publicly available flight radar information](#)

shows that the plane, although it has not returned to Venezuela since the discovery of its illicit cargo, has continued to travel to Medellin, Colombia, as recently as this past Monday.

Multiple CIA ties

In addition to the dramatic and abrupt change in flight patterns that occurred just weeks before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence prompted Venezuelan opposition member Juan Guaidó to declare himself “interim president,” a subsequent *McClatchy* [follow-up investigation](#)

also uncovered the fact that two top executives at the company that owns the plane in question had previously worked with a company connected to controversial CIA “black sites.”

Indeed, the chairman and majority owner of 21 Air, Adolfo Moreno, and 21 Air’s director of quality control, Michael Steinke, both have “either coincidental or direct ties” to Gemini Air Cargo, a company previously [named by](#) Amnesty International as one of the air charter services involved in a CIA rendition program. In this CIA program, individuals suspected of terrorism were abducted by the intelligence agency and then taken abroad to third-country secret “black sites” where torture, officially termed “enhanced interrogation,” was regularly performed.

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