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Ecuadorian Drug Lord 'Fito' Faces US Court on Trafficking Charges After Extradition Deal

July 22, 2025

– Categories: Crime



José Adolfo Macías, known as 'Fito' and the feared leader of the notorious Ecuadorian criminal group Los Choneros, appeared in a U.S. federal court in New York on Monday, and pleaded not guilty to multiple charges tied to international drug and arms trafficking. His extradition from Ecuador marks a significant moment for President Daniel Noboa's government but also highlights the ongoing struggles within Ecuador's justice system.

Macías was formally arraigned in the Eastern District of New York, where seven charges were brought against him, all connected to smuggling cocaine and illegal firearms. Judge

Vera M. Scanlon ordered that he be held without bail at the Brooklyn Municipal Detention Center, agreeing with prosecutors who view him as a high flight risk due to his criminal history. The drug lord was flown to the United States on Sunday following an extradition agreement between Ecuador and the U.S.

“The defendant and his co-conspirators flooded the United States and other countries with drugs and used extreme measures of violence in their quest for power and control,” said Joseph Nocella, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York. Authorities accuse Macías of running a sophisticated network that not only shipped large quantities of cocaine across the Pacific but also imported American weapons used to arm his hitmen and criminal factions back in Ecuador.

The charges against Macías carry a potential prison sentence ranging from 10 to 50 years. However, Ecuador secured diplomatic assurances that he would neither face life imprisonment nor the death penalty in the U.S., a key condition for allowing the extradition. Robert Murphy, Acting Administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), commented, “José ‘Fito’ Macias Villamar thought he could traffic poison into our country, smuggle American weapons back to his killers, and further his criminal enterprise using chaos and bloodshed. He was wrong. Today, the kingpin of Los Choneros faces justice on U.S. soil for his crimes.”

Justice Issues

The extradition is being hailed as a major win by Ecuador’s President Noboa, who took to social media shortly after the departure of Macías. “Farewell, Fito,” he wrote. “Fito is now in the U.S. This is thanks to you, Ecuadorians, who said yes in the referendum,” referring to the April referendum that opened the door for extraditions of Ecuadorian nationals wanted abroad.

While this move is portrayed as a victory in the fight against organised crime, legal experts warn it also exposes deeper systemic issues in Ecuador’s justice system. Attorney Dolores Miño points out that the extradition of ‘Fito’ does not mean all dangerous criminals can be handed over to the U.S. “One of the mistakes prior to the referendum was that people believed we could send any dangerous criminal to the United States for the justice system in that country to take charge, but that’s not how it works,” she explains. Extradition requires strict conditions, including proof that the crimes occurred in the jurisdiction requesting it.

The reliance on foreign courts to deal with high-profile criminals highlights a troubling lack of confidence in Ecuador's own institutions. Corruption scandals have rocked the judiciary, with investigations ongoing into numerous judges, prosecutors, and court officials suspected of colluding with organised crime. Since July 2024, over 45 judges, 11 prosecutors, and 33 judicial workers have been removed from office due to corruption or links to criminal networks.

Macías' extradition may be the largest blow yet to criminal organisations in Ecuador. Still, it also serves as a reminder of the serious challenges the country faces in restoring trust and effectiveness in its justice system. Until these issues are addressed, the temptation to "outsource" justice to foreign courts will remain a controversial but necessary tool in combating violent crime.