

THE LEDE

AN ECUADORIAN FISHING BOAT DISAPPEARS AMID TRUMP'S STRIKES IN THE PACIFIC

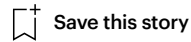
The President claims to be targeting vessels involved in drug trafficking. Were the fishermen who went missing with the Fiorella collateral damage?

By Will Freeman

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Illustration by Anuj Shrestha



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Juan Carlos Valencia spent the afternoon of January 13th with his father, Johnny, loading ice into the hold of the Fiorella, a small longline-fishing boat. That night, Valencia, the vessel's captain, set out with a crew of nine from Jaramijó, Ecuador, for what was expected to be a typical three-week voyage, casting lines for shark, marlin, and tuna.

Most of the crew members had sailed together for years, spending as much time on board as at home; several were related. All but one lived in Jaramijó, a town of around thirty thousand people etched into a coastal hill. For centuries, the area has been renowned for its expert navigators—one elderly resident is said to still be able to read the open Pacific by the stars.

The Lede

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After several days at sea, Cristhian Flores, a thirty-two-year-old fisherman who was aboard the Fiorella for the first time, noticed something odd in the sky. "It didn't sound like an airplane," he told me. "The sound was softer."

"What's that?" he recalled asking Valencia.

"A drone," Valencia replied.

Since September, 2025, the skies of the eastern Pacific have buzzed with drones, as American forces have mounted a military campaign, known as Operation Southern Spear, against suspected drug smugglers. At least sixty-six strikes have been conducted on vessels there and in the Caribbean, killing two hundred and fifteen people, in what many international legal scholars describe as an ongoing series of extrajudicial murders. Daniel Noboa, Ecuador's right-wing president, has welcomed U.S. military involvement in anti-narcotics efforts in the region.

Around the time that the drone appeared, two aircraft began following the Fiorella, descending toward it, climbing away, and circling. "Like they were hunting," Flores said. Still, the crew sailed on, reeling in squid to use as bait when they set their lines. On January 19th, in the late afternoon, a large patrol vessel appeared on the horizon; peering across the open water, Flores and Dimas Ignacio Álvarez, another crew member, thought they saw a U.S. flag. They anticipated receiving instructions to stop for inspection, a routine procedure in waters policed for drugs and illegal fishing. But none came.

Valencia had been calling his father three or four times a day, on a satellite phone, nervously reporting that they were being followed, though he had no idea why. Johnny, himself a retired captain, tried to offer reassurance. “Calm down, my son,” he said. Valencia considered turning back to port, but Johnny reminded him that it would take a full catch to cover the cost of the voyage—more than twenty thousand dollars. That night, the *Fiorella* cut its engines, and the men prepared to fish.

At daybreak on January 20th, four crew members took two skiffs in opposite directions to spread miles of baited hooks along a horizontal cord, planning to haul it back by evening and meet the *Fiorella* at a rendezvous point. Valencia called his father again. He could still hear the drone and aircraft, he said, but they were quieter than before. “So far, we’re fine,” he told Johnny. Midsentence, the connection dropped. Valencia’s prepaid minutes must have run out, Johnny thought; he and his wife started calling friends to scrape together money to add more.

Flores and Álvarez, on one of the skiffs, were floating approximately fifteen nautical miles east of the *Fiorella*. Around one o’clock, as they were taking a break, they noticed a column of smoke to the west—“very tall, very black, very large,” according to Flores. They had spoken with Valencia by radio hours earlier; now their calls wouldn’t connect. For another hour, the smoke kept rising.

Eventually, Flores and Álvarez motored to the rendezvous point, where there was no sign of the *Fiorella*, or of the other skiff. The next day, they shot a cellphone video as they dumped their catch—half a dozen small blue sharks—to lighten the load, realizing that they would have to try to make it back to shore, hundreds of miles away, on what little fuel they had. “The boat just disappeared,” Flores shouts, in the recording. “We’re totally lost here.” The men were soon out of water. On the morning of January 22nd, another boat, *Dios Es Mi Guía* (God Is My Guide) found them, sunburned and dehydrated.

That evening, the *Fiorella*’s owners—Eduardo Moreira and Nancy Rivera—reported the boat missing, and the following day they filed a complaint at the public prosecutor’s office, triggering a preliminary investigation. Navy officials in Manta, a larger, neighboring port city, said that a search had been activated, but offered no specifics. The owners, anxious and increasingly desperate, chartered a boat and mounted their own search; after a few days, the crew discovered parts of the *Fiorella*’s longline gear floating about ninety nautical miles northwest of its last recorded position. The owners informed the Navy and the prosecutor’s office of their find, but, according to Juan Alvia Cevallos, a lawyer representing them and the families of the missing men, no one ever asked to inspect it.

Alvia and the families came to doubt that an official search was under way at all; in fact, it seems that the Navy, according to a later report, waited a full nine days from the initial alert to task another vessel to look for the *Fiorella*, requesting only that it scan along its existing route, to the Galápagos, nowhere near the *Fiorella*’s last known coordinates. After about a month, the Navy shifted the search from “active” to “passive”—standard procedure when officials believe the probability of finding survivors is low. The families have insisted that the missing men have no connection to the drug trade, and that they are owed an explanation of what happened.

But, according to Alvia, during a visit to Manta's port authority, a Navy official suggested to the families that the men knew what they got themselves into, and "they had to face the consequences."

The seafaring province of Manabí—which includes Manta and Jaramijó—has in the past two decades been utterly transformed by the drug trade, and by various attempts to crack down on it. In the early two-thousands, Colombian cocaine traffickers, seeking to evade tightening controls in their country, began to reroute shipments through coastal towns in Manabí and elsewhere in Ecuador. Emissaries of the Sinaloa cartel arrived, too. Expert navigators in places such as Jaramijó were offered large sums of money to move parcels of drugs and later to run fuel to narco-vessels, which would in turn bring the shipments to Central America and Mexico. Networks of *enganchadores*, or "fixers," emerged to coerce fishermen who resisted, often by stealing boat motors to push them into debt—and, as a result, into servitude to the traffickers. (In the past two years, at least seven boat captains in the Manta area have been assassinated; Ecuadorian police suspect that the killings were reprisals for resisting the commands of traffickers or tied to disputes between them.)

In 2020, the leader of Los Choneros, at the time Ecuador's largest drug gang, which originated in Manabí, was killed in a high-end shopping mall. Rival gangs clashed over control of the group's routes. Since then, Ecuador's homicide rate has more than quintupled; it is now the highest in South America. Many government officials have been mired in drug-related corruption scandals, especially at the local level. Noboa was elected in 2023, and soon declared war on organized crime, sending the military onto the streets and into the jails and allowing warrantless home searches. Arguing that a state as small as Ecuador could never defeat the traffickers on its own, he ratified a series of deals with the Biden Administration that opened the door for U.S. troops to establish a presence in the country.

After Noboa was reelected, in 2025, he concentrated power and moved to suspend more legal guarantees. He and the Trump Administration started to run joint military operations against alleged traffickers. Noboa has also partnered with the former Blackwater C.E.O. Erik Prince, who now runs the security firm Vectus Global, to help "strengthen capacities in the fight against narcoterrorism and the protection of our waters from illegal fishing."

In late April, I drove from Manta to Jaramijó to meet the families of the eight missing Fiorella fishermen. On the way, I passed a wall of corrugated metal, enclosing an overgrown field, that had been stencilled with a promise: "Here an attraction will be built in front of the sea very soon." The artisanal-fishing industry had been all but paralyzed by high gas prices since the closure of the Strait of Hormuz; a large number of vessels were anchored close to shore.

I had expected to meet the Fiorella families in their homes, but Alvia told me that we would instead gather in the city hall, and that Jaramijó's mayor, Simetrio Calderón, would also attend. Calderón, a former shipbuilder and soccer-club president, belongs to the country's largest leftist opposition party, which has been critical of Noboa's collaboration with Donald Trump. In 2006, Calderón had been arrested in a multicountry drug-trafficking investigation. He was released the following year, and has maintained his innocence. I asked Alvia

whether the families would feel comfortable speaking openly in his presence. “We need all the support we can get,” he said.

Two dozen men, women, and children filled the front rows of an auditorium, facing an empty stage. They clutched laminated photos of the missing. One girl, about ten, held her father’s picture so that it covered her own face; her black braids poked out from the edges. Toddlers squealed and played, and an older woman cried softly. For a time, no one spoke. Eventually, Johnny Valencia stood up.

“What happened to the Negra Duarte and the Don Maca, the same thing must have happened” to the Fiorella, he said. “Bring them back.”

Others echoed his call: “Bring them back.”

Johnny was referring to two boats that had sunk in the months after the Fiorella’s disappearance. On March 17th, the Negra Francisca Duarte II, returning from waters west of the Galápagos, was attacked by drones inside Ecuador’s exclusive economic zone, its crew said. Sixteen fishermen, some injured and bleeding, took skiffs to the closest vessel they could see: a blue boat, crewed, per testimony later given to an Ecuadorian human-rights group, by uniformed, English-speaking men. The fishermen were hooded and bound, then handed off to authorities from El Salvador, who took them to a naval base in La Unión, on that country’s Pacific coast, more than a thousand miles from Manta. They were released days later and made their way back to Ecuador. (The Salvadoran military has said that the men had been shipwrecked, and were rescued in a “humanitarian operation.”) The crew of the Don Maca described experiencing a similar sequence of events nine days later.

In the auditorium, the Fiorella families spoke one after another. The daughter of one crew member, her voice shaking, asked how her father, who has diabetes, would manage without his medicine. Everyone seemed to think that the men had been captured and were alive somewhere, possibly in American custody. A mother described how her missing son had comforted her after another son had died. “He would hold me and say, ‘Mamita, don’t cry.’ . . . He’d put his arms around me so I wouldn’t suffer, and he’d sometimes take me out for a walk. He’d say, ‘Mami, let’s go eat. Let’s go get some ice cream.’ He was my boy. I miss him so much. I don’t know what to do. I would like to die. Because I am suffering so much now.”

Calderón, a big, bald man wearing a gold chain and cross-shaped earrings, sat off to the side, amid an entourage of muscular assistants in polo shirts, poking at his phone. At one point, he took the microphone and delivered an impassioned, obscenity-laced speech against the United States, calling for the strikes to end. But when the sister of one of the missing asked what he was doing to get answers about the Fiorella specifically, he became defensive. “I’m not afraid of anyone,” he said, his voice rising. “I’ve been kidnapped, I’ve been shot at, I’ve been jailed.” The families looked dejected. No part of the state—not city hall, not the Navy, and especially not the national government, with its security agreements with the U.S.—appeared motivated

to find out what had happened to the Fiorella. “We have help from no one,” Johnny told me a few days later. “The government does nothing. They act when there are drugs. Until drugs arrive, they do not act at all.”

Trump has argued that the strikes are stanching the influx of cocaine into the United States. “We’ve knocked out ninety-seven per cent of the drugs coming in by water,” he said, earlier this year, during an appearance on Fox News. Yet public-health scholars and epidemiologists who track cocaine use in the United States say that street prices, which would be expected to rise if the strikes were producing a real supply crunch, have remained essentially stable since the start of Southern Spear, as have the drug’s availability and purity. The Administration has never presented evidence that a targeted boat was carrying drugs; at a congressional hearing in June, senators from both parties, drawing on confidential briefings, pointed out that the presence of drugs was not among the criteria used for choosing which boats to destroy. What the strikes have reliably produced is footage—clips of burning vessels, posted by government accounts and by Trump himself.

During my trip to Ecuador, I met Gonzalo Salvador Holguín, a former diplomat who helped negotiate the Biden-era security agreements, at an upscale café in Quito. Holguín told me that an investigation was necessary to confirm what had happened to the Fiorella, but also indicated that he already knew what would be found. “These are not poor fishermen,” he said, without hesitation. “They are people directly connected to the drug business.” He offered no evidence. Of the ten Fiorella crew members, only two had any criminal record, according to Ecuador’s own interior ministry: Flores had once fished for protected species, and one missing man had failed to pay child support. Holguín nevertheless suggested that they had chosen to work with traffickers.

With data compiled by Global Fishing Watch, an N.G.O. based in Washington, D.C., I was able to view a map of the Fiorella’s final trip. It matched the crew’s account: the tracking signal vanished permanently, in international waters, at the exact time the survivors had described. Renato Rivera Rhon, a senior analyst at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, told me that the Fiorella’s track bore “no relation to a possible [trafficking] route.” Alex Hearn, a marine biologist at Universidad San Francisco de Quito, agreed that it was consistent with a normal longline-fishing trip.

In response to a detailed list of questions about the Fiorella, the Don Maca, and the Negra Francisca, U.S. Southern Command told me, “We have no knowledge of, nor were U.S. Southern Command forces involved in, the incidents described in those reports,” adding that “every action taken during Operation Southern Spear is deliberate, lawful, and precise, aimed squarely at narco-terrorists and their enablers.” (This month, Congressman Mike Rogers, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, read a Pentagon denial into the record. The three alleged strikes “did not occur,” he said.) Ecuador’s defense ministry offered me a carefully worded statement: it said that there was no evidence of national or international military vessels in the area between January 13th and 21st, and that the Ecuadorian government had not authorized a maritime-security operation involving a foreign state during the month of January, up to the date the Fiorella

disappeared. However, it added that it had no information about foreign aircraft or vessels in international waters that didn't announce their presence. "Human errors—surely there may be some," Juan Carlos Vega, Ecuador's minister of agriculture and fisheries, told me. "Sometimes there may be collateral damage. In this war—which, in the end, is a war—there is always that probability."

In April, the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances took up the case of the *Fiorella*. It requested that Ecuador mount a full search and establish "mechanisms for coöperation, coördination, and assistance" with any foreign governments that might have been implicated in the incident, including those of the United States and El Salvador. In mid-May, the Noboa government responded, late and only partially, without noting the establishment of any such mechanisms. Ecuador's public defender, César Córdova, whose office investigates rights violations, told me that he would not push the government to request U.S. help in the investigation, because it would imply that Ecuador suspected its closest ally was behind the strike, and could upset the relationship.

There are still no solid answers about what became of the *Fiorella*. There was no storm on January 20th that might have sunk it; the engine was new, bought on credit, and recently paid off. Pirates and trafficking groups have attacked fishing boats, but those attacks tend to happen close to shore, not hundreds of miles into the ocean, and the Ecuadorian defense ministry said it had seen no evidence to suggest that the *Fiorella* was sunk in such an attack. The crews of the *Negra Francisca* and the *Don Maca* were released within days of their arrival in El Salvador, so it seems unlikely that the *Fiorella* men are being held there. Prince's Vectus Global has helped carry out drone attacks in Haiti, where it holds contracts, but is not known for conducting sophisticated strikes on the open ocean. For the families, the most plausible answer is that the United States is behind the *Fiorella*'s disappearance. On June 13th, the Democratic congressmen Joaquin Castro and Bill Keating published a letter addressed to the Departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security, and the Coast Guard, demanding information on any U.S. involvement in the three incidents. (Through my work as a Council on Foreign Relations fellow, I advised them.)

On June 6th, a fishing vessel in Manta burst into flames; hours later, more than thirty other boats had caught fire. The seemingly coördinated nature of the blaze fed speculation that a criminal group or a botched state-security operation was to blame. Two men were badly burned—one died, and the other remains hospitalized—and the *Fiorella*'s owners lost two more skiffs. Eight days later, Gloria Alexandra Bravo—the prosecutor who had led the *Fiorella* investigation and is reported to have also worked on the port-fire case—was shot dead in Manta with her sister. They were nieces of the *Fiorella* families' lawyer, Alvia. The prosecutor's office called Bravo's killing retaliation for her work against organized crime, but the perpetrator escaped the scene and remains at large. This lack of accountability is fast becoming the norm in Ecuador. On June 18th, Noboa, after meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at the Pentagon, signed a Presidential decree granting immunity from prosecution to "foreign personnel from cooperating states" that assist in Ecuador's fight against drug trafficking.

One day, I went down to the docks that the Fiorella had sailed from four months earlier. The water was deep turquoise, the sky leaden gray. Wooden boats bobbed in long rows, their names and registration numbers hand-painted on the hulls, as men in neon vests unloaded catch and frigate birds swooped down to pick at the scraps.

I was there to meet Carlos Carrión Astudillo, who has lived in Jaramijó for eighteen years and runs an association for the families of Ecuadorian fishermen who have been disappeared or detained abroad. Carrión carried a magazine, in mint condition, published by the Ecuadorian public defender's office in 2018. One article documented alleged attacks by U.S. naval forces on Ecuadorian fishing vessels suspected of carrying drugs or undocumented immigrants during the two-thousands. (The U.S. military operated a base in Manta until 2009.) Those were the years that Johnny had taught his son, who was just eight when he started working on the water, how to sail. Entries in the magazine listed boat names, the dates they were boarded or sunk, the U.S. vessel allegedly involved, and the number of people who survived. For some, the number read "none." The disappearance of the Fiorella, Carrión argued, was not new. He, and many others, suspected it was an old pattern returning.

Carrión took me up a hill to a restaurant owned by Solanda Vera and her son Humberto, a fisherman in his fifties. Humberto's younger brother, Tayron, had been twenty-six when he vanished with the Jorge IV, a ship with a crew of eighteen that sailed from Manta in June of 2002. Solanda remembered how Tayron had brought her a popsicle the day before he left. Eventually, a decomposed body was found floating far off the coast of Esmeraldas, north of Manta, as was a buoy and a life vest. These were identified as all that remained of the Jorge IV, which Carrión argued was implausible—a vessel that size would have left hundreds of floating objects. He believed that the Jorge IV was sunk elsewhere, the scene staged to exculpate the United States. Twenty-four years on, Solanda was still demanding answers from authorities in Quito. After Tayron had gone missing, the family went to Manta's docks to throw white flowers into the water, she told me, but had never filled an empty casket with his clothes and carried it to the cemetery—the other half of the local ritual for fishermen lost at sea. They still believed that he might return.

Humberto's eyes filmed over as he listened. But then he started to talk about being back on the water—he would soon depart on his next fishing voyage—and smiled. "When the motor stops, there is this calmness," he said. "The air, the sea, the horizon, everything free." At night, he would lie on the deck, looking up at the star-filled sky. "When I am alone, in the middle of the sea, I say to the moon, 'Greet my family. They are looking at you, too.'" ♦

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