

Pilot who helped Maduro allies evade US sanctions sentenced

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By JOSHUA GOODMAN March 17, 2021

MIAMI (AP) — A Miami-based pilot who arranged chartered flights to Russia and elsewhere for top allies of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has been sentenced to more than four years in prison.

Venezuelan-born Victor Mones pled guilty in January in Manhattan federal court to the charges of breaking U.S. sanctions against his two top clients: former Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami and his alleged front man, businessman Samark Lopez, both of whom were designated narcotics kingpins in 2017.

To avoid detection, Mones, 52, and his co-conspirators allegedly used code names, falsified flight manifests and received cash flown into the United States from Venezuela. At one point, Mones tried to cover his tracks by instructing one of his pilots to lie to law enforcement.

The case is one of the most prominent to date against a bevy of Maduro insiders accused in multiple U.S. federal courts of corruption, drug trafficking and embezzling funds from the state-run oil giant PDVSA. But it hit a major snag last year when the key informant against Mones, fellow Miami pilot Alejandro Marin, was caught lying to his handlers about cash that went missing from a package of 1.3 million euros that he transported by private jet to the U.S. in 2018. Marin has since been jailed on charges of making false statement to a U.S. federal agents.

Prosecutors in court Wednesday argued for an stiffer sentence, accusing Mones of aligning with Venezuela's "murderous regime" by arranging flights for Maduro's 2018 presidential campaign, which the U.S.-backed opposition boycotted as fraudulent after several top opponents were barred from running.

"This was not a limo service," Assistant U.S. Attorney Sam Adelsberg told the court. "It was a sophisticated scheme that for years undermined our national security and foreign policy."

But Mones' attorney Christine Chung said her client had no sympathy for Maduro's socialist government. Instead, she described him as an immigrant entrepreneur who built a successful business catering to wealthy Venezuelan clients before getting taken advantage of by dubious clients — El Aissami and Lopez — who had trouble paying their bills as U.S. pressure on Venezuela increased.

“He was providing services to people much more powerful than him who ultimately had him in a financial stranglehold,” Chung argued. “They were using my client because he was giving them free flights.”

She also indicated that Mones had provided some sort of help to U.S. intelligence agencies although she did not specify what it consisted of and Adelsberg objected to any discussion in open courtroom of what he said was a highly sensitive matter.

Judge Alvin Hellerstein agreed that Mones’ crimes had serious implications for U.S. national security and took issue with Chung’s description of Mones as a “glorified taxi driver.”

“At some point, you can’t be indifferent. You have to understand the consequences of what you’re doing,” he said.

But he was persuaded to show leniency and order a 55-month sentence — below the recommended federal guidelines of at least 70 months — because of the conditions Mones endured while battling COVID-19 in prison and the lack of a criminal record. He also ordered Mones to pay a \$250,000 fine.

“Sometimes the eyes of a wise man are blinded,” Hellerstein scolded Mones. “But you knew this was the wrong thing to do.”

Mones said he would be ashamed of his actions for the rest of his life and in no way did he intend to harm his adopted homeland.

“My ego and selfishness took over,” he said while breaking down in tears. “When the sanctions came down against my clients I was desperate. I had the false illusion that it was possible to maintain the company and lifestyle I had built.”

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