Colombian pair who fought for Ukraine 'kidnapped by Putin' in Venezuela

Families describe agony after men 'gifted' to Russia by Caracas' president

Fermin Torrano
in Popayán, Colombia

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Alexander Ante's mother Otilia's greatest fear is dying before seeing her son again. He is now in a Russian jail Credit: Fermin Torrano

For six months, Otilia Ante barely slept, enduring an agony that began when her son disappeared. Or, more accurately, when Vladimir Putin kidnapped him.

It happened on July 18 last year, on the Colombian's journey home after nine months fighting for Kyiv in Ukraine.

Doña Otilia, as she is known in the Colombian city of Popayán, had braced herself countless times for the possibility that her "hijito" (little boy) might be killed in the war.

She never imagined danger would come after he laid down his arms, or that her son would be at the centre of an international (though under-reported) scandal, or that he would appear on a video along with a compatriot speaking from a Russian jail.

My name is Jose Aron Medina Aranda, in Ukraine,
49 battalion Karpatska Sich.

Credit: RT

Along with the compatriot, Otilia's son Alexander is the first Ukrainian fighter detained in a third country unrelated to the war.

It is believed the pair were snatched as they passed through Venezuela's capital Caracas and extradited to Russia – a gift from Nicolás Maduro to Putin, one dictator to another.

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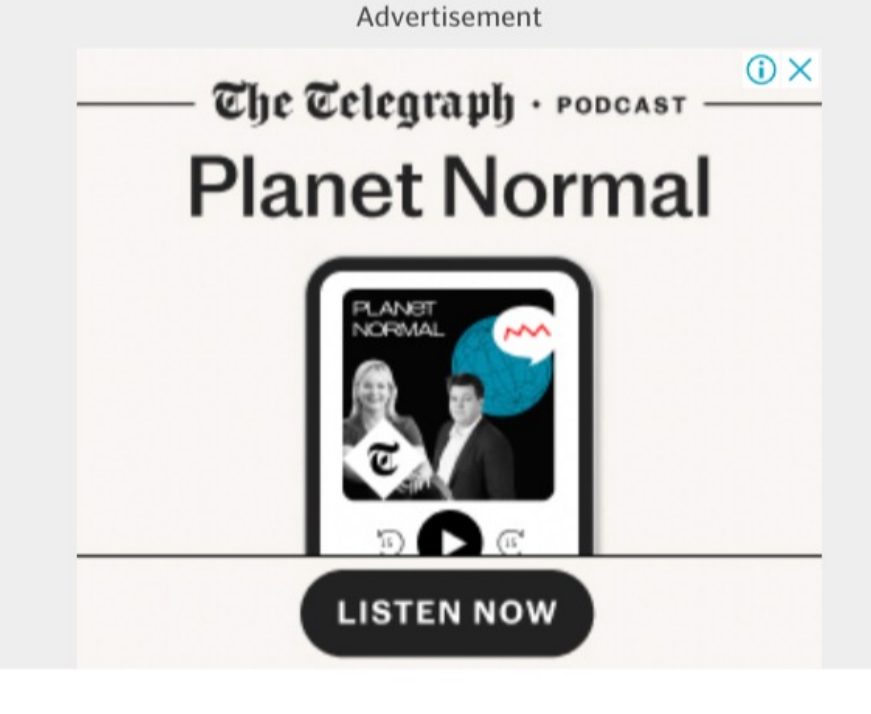
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It also represents a clear warning from Moscow to foreign fighters who sign up to join Kyiv's cause: no one is beyond the Kremlin's reach.

"I'm tired of living. I don't know what else to do, always thinking about my son," Otilia says, burying her face in her hands.

"I don't know if he's cold, if he's hungry, or how they're treating him. I know nothing! It's so hard… Sometimes I wish I could catch a plane and leave, but where could I go?"

Every night, Otilia lights candles and prays to the saints asking for her son's return Credit: Fermin Torrano

At 46, Alexander dreamed of moving his mother out of their troubled neighbourhood.

Drawing on his experience fighting guerrillas in the Colombian army, he flew to Ukraine and enlisted in 2023, something which can earn foreign fighters £2,400 to £3,200 a month.

Like many fighters from abroad, he joined 49th Infantry Battalion Karpatska Sich – a unit originally created by volunteers with close ties to Ukraine's far-Right movement, but has been professionalised in recent years.

The unit is popular with foreign fighters not because of its ideology, but because it offers direct access to the front lines.

His mother said Alexander never caused trouble. He phoned every night and paid for her medication while he was away.

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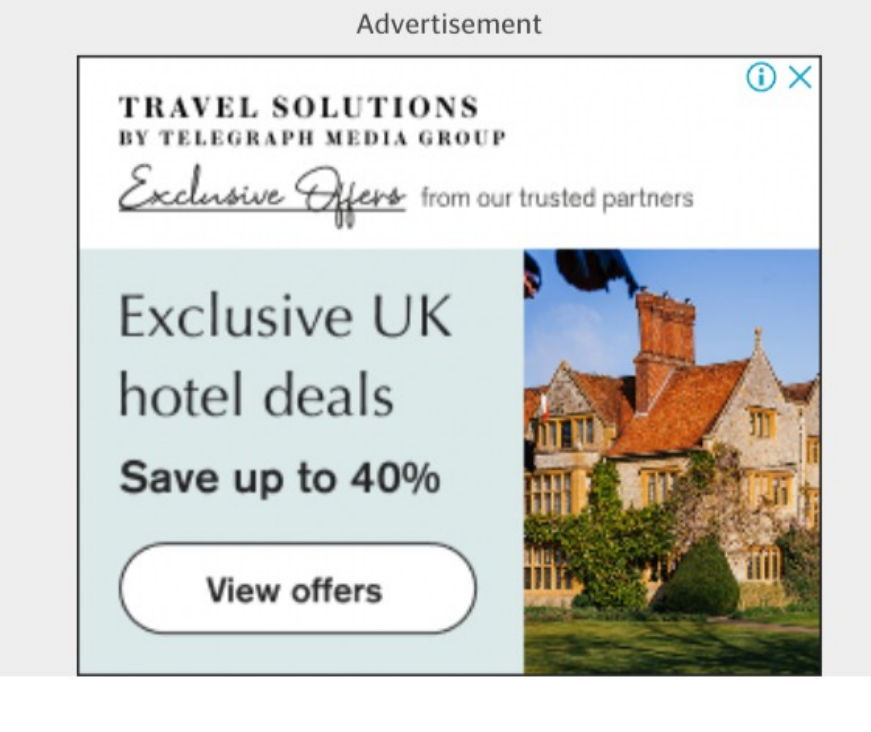
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"He has no vices; he's always looking out for me," Otilia says.

Unlike many of the soldiers in the 49th Infantry Battalion Karpatska Sich, Alexander survived and by the summer of 2024, he was coming home.

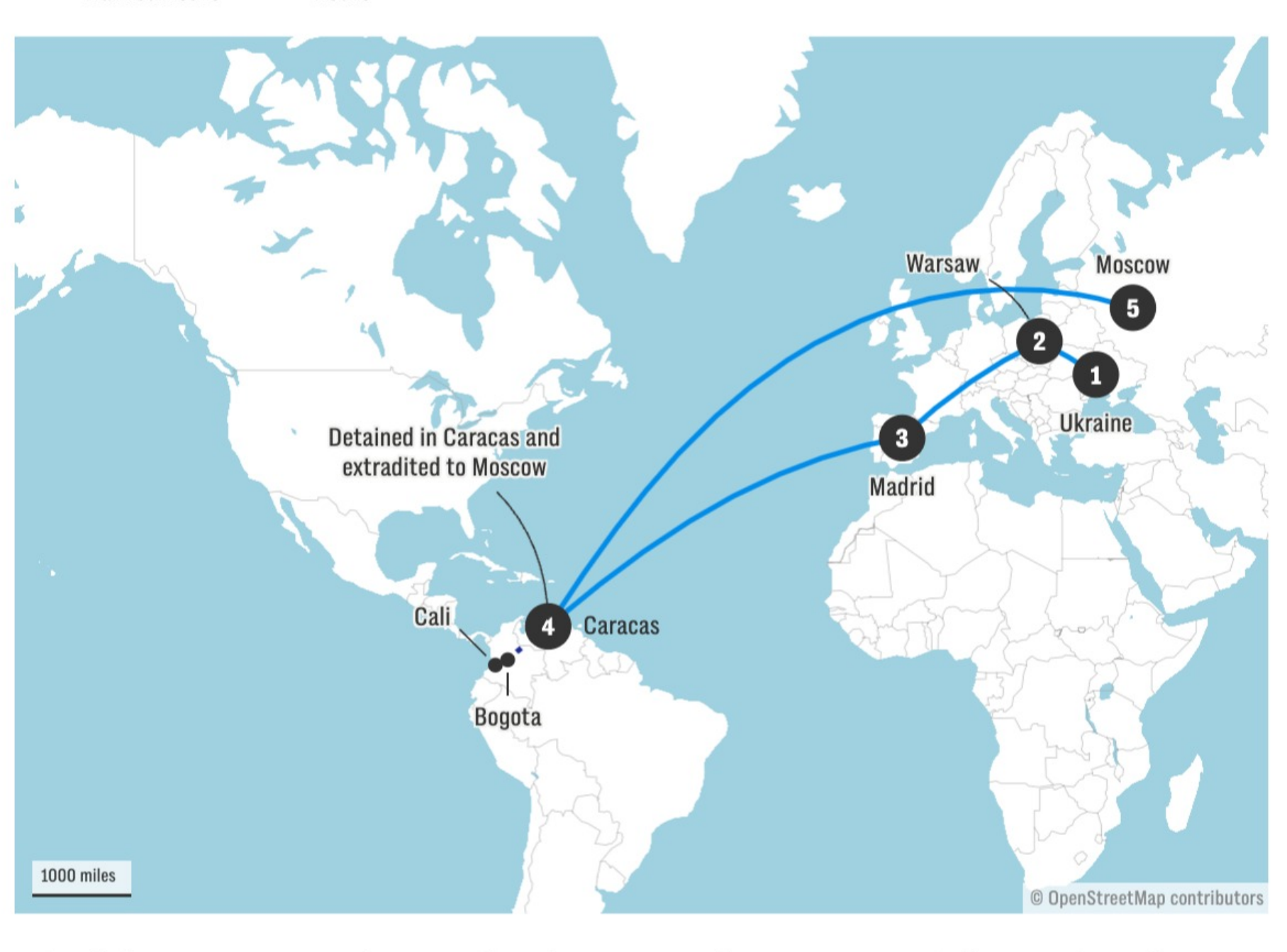
He called his mother on July 18 just hours before embarking on his return journey.

"Mamita, I'll be home on Saturday. Keep some sancocho [a typical Colombian stew] for me," he told her.

After crossing from Ukraine into Poland by land and flying to Madrid, he still had three more flights – Caracas, Bogotá and Cali – before finally reaching home.

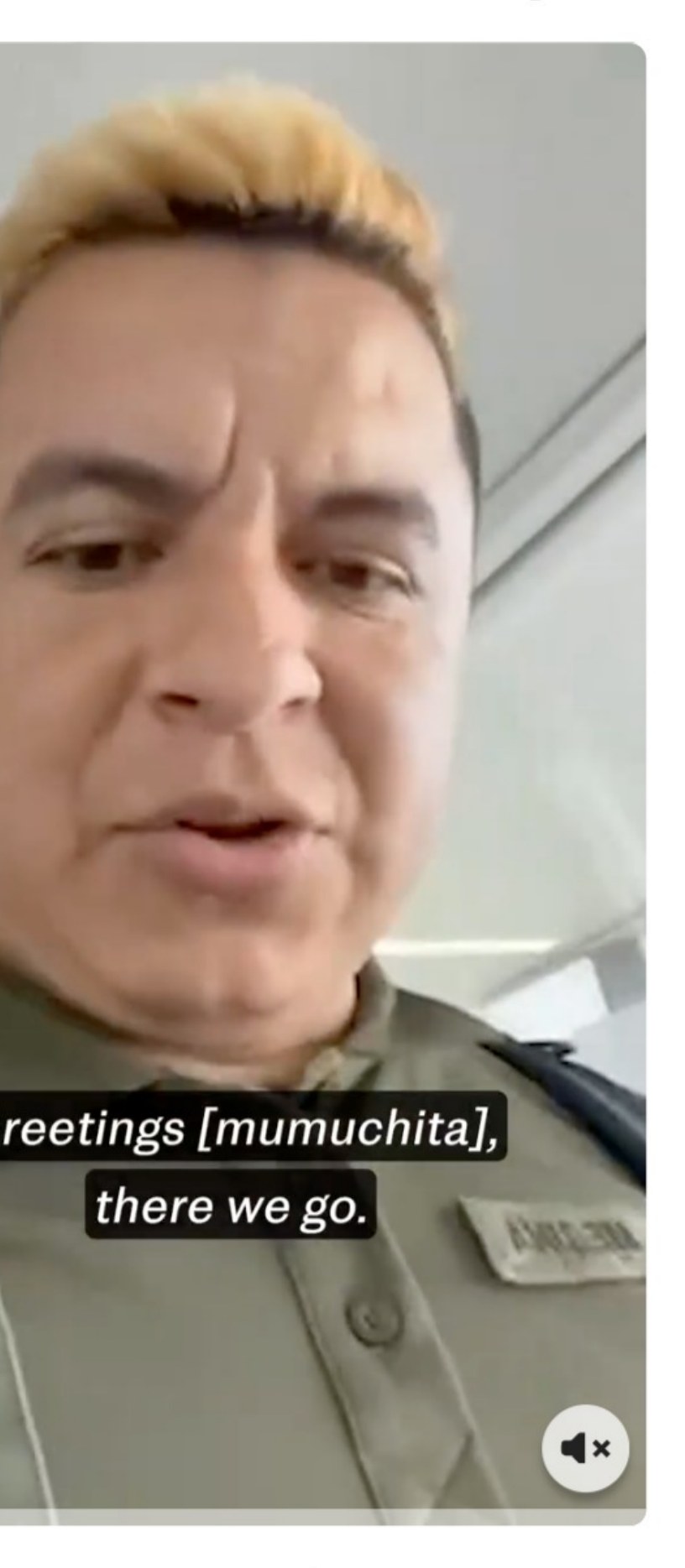
But Saturday passed without news. Sunday and Monday followed in silence. Then Tuesday arrived, and with it "the waiting, and the waiting".

How Colombian pair's journey home ended in despair



Nine kilometres away from Otilia's home, another woman, Cielo Paz, found herself similarly anxious. Her husband, José Aron Medina, had stopped replying to her messages.

He had sent a video of himself boarding in Madrid with Alexander, followed hours later by a location pin from Venezuela's Caracas Airport.



He had planned to return to Popayán in time for the weekend to celebrate his 37th birthday. But José Aron never arrived, and none of his wife's loving text messages ever reached him.

So, the search began: missing-person reports, appeals to the local council, the prosecutor's office and the ministry of foreign affairs.

With almost no resources, Otilia and her other children and Cielo and her siblings moved heaven and earth to find the pair. Official and unofficial inquiries turned up nothing.

José Aron Medina's wife, Cielo Paz, with their young daughter, Samara Credit: Fermin Torrano

Then on Aug 30 last year, 43 days after Alexander and José Aron vanished, they reappeared.

Russia Today, the Kremlin-controlled television channel, broadcast a staged "interview", revealing that the two former Colombian soldiers were being held in Moscow. The headline read "Inevitable Punishment".

In the footage, handcuffed and flanked by two balaclava-clad guards, José Aron emerges from a cell.

Trembling and avoiding the camera's gaze, Alexander identifies himself.

The propaganda video, in which both men express regret for their time in Ukraine, offered a brief flash of hope to their families.

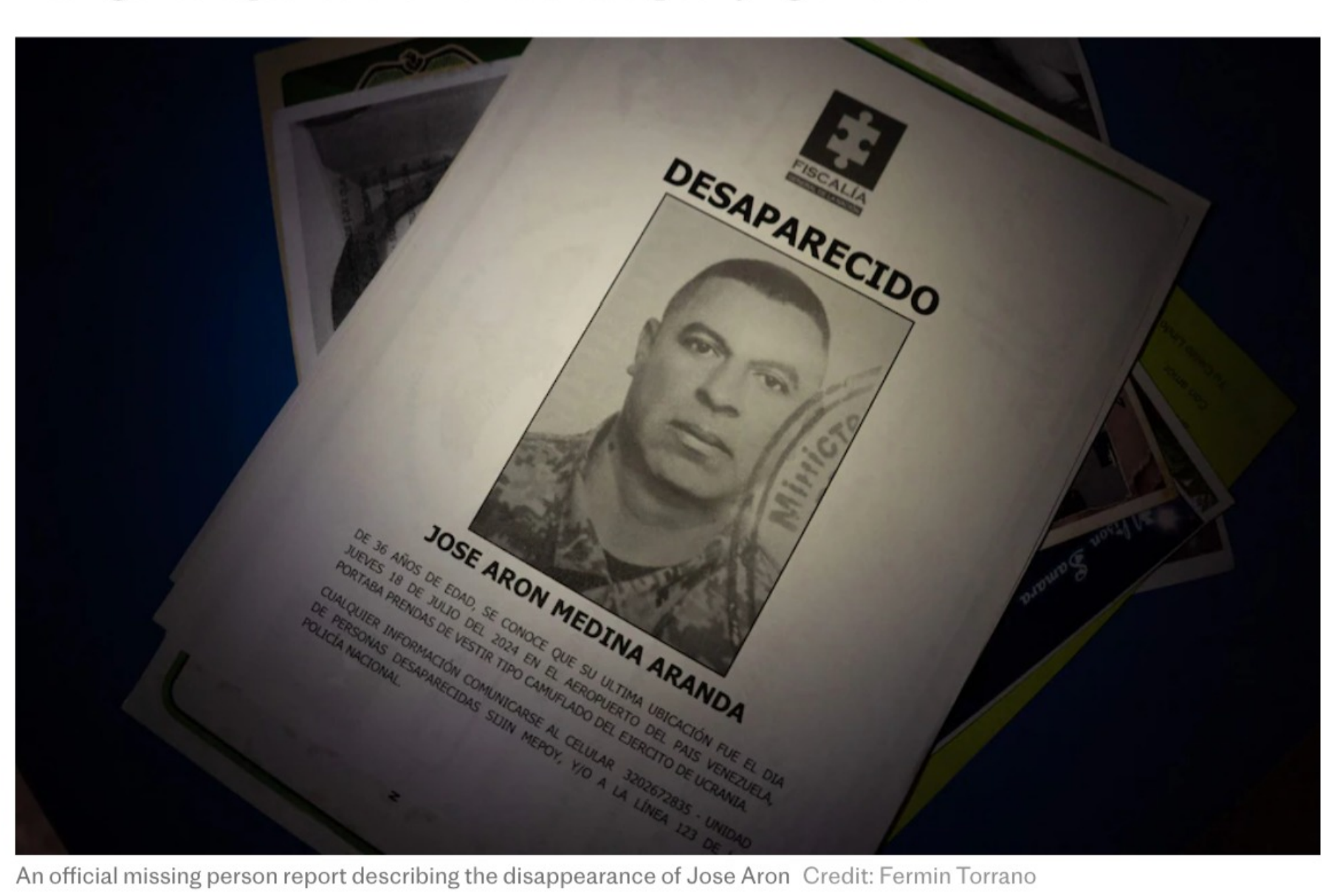
Yes, they were in detention, looking frail and coerced, but at least they were alive.

But relief quickly turned into a nightmare. It was the first and last proof of life their families received.

Since then, neither family has managed to contact the men or speak to the court-appointed lawyer assigned by Russia. It is a voiceless, inescapable tunnel.

Why were these two Colombians detained? What happened during the month and a half of their disappearance? How did they end up going from Caracas Airport to a Moscow prison? And what might their abduction signify on the global stage?

Venezuela and Russia have maintained diplomatic silence. RT claims Russian intelligence captured the men without specifying where.



An official missing person report describing the disappearance of Jose Aron Credit: Fermin Torrano

FISCALÍA
DESAPARECIDO
ALEXANDER ANTE

Alexander's Ukrainian brigade only sent back his military passport, seen on top of his missing person report Credit: Fermin Torrano

Interviewed by The Telegraph, Héctor Arenas Neira, the Colombian ambassador to Russia, acknowledges that he does not know how they arrived in Moscow and avoids commenting on the violation of international law and Colombian sovereignty.

The only certainty is that Alexander and José Aron landed in Venezuela on a Plus Ultra airline flight, which only operates with Latin America, after breaking their contracts with the Ukrainian army.

Neither their arrest nor their extrajudicial transfer was ever officially issued, but it took place just days after Venezuela's fraudulent election.

Maduro may have found a gift in these two Colombians to bolster Russian support before entrenching himself in power.

Alexander and José Aron are now serving half a year "on remand", and face a possible 12 to 18 years in prison for "being mercenaries", according to Mr Neira.

"Russia can call them mercenaries, but they still have rights that must be upheld. And it's even worse if they weren't active combatants at the time," explains a member of Congressman José Jaime Uscátegui's team, which legally supported the case from the beginning.

"You could argue they'd laid down their arms and were simply going home… in which case, international humanitarian law gives them special protection."

Colombian authorities have not pressured Venezuela or Russia and the consul in Moscow has made only one visit in the past six months.

Their defence is handled by a public defender who does not speak Spanish – a lawyer selected by the very Russian state that abducted them thousands of miles from its jurisdiction, on charges that are hard to justify.

"Russia claims they were captured in Moscow," Mr Neira tells The Telegraph. "How did they get to Moscow? I don't know."

He says he doesn't plan to investigate or complain. "I am not here to judge or criticise the Russian judicial system."

Otilia Ante goes through every single photo of her son she has Credit: Fermin Torrano

According to the Geneva Convention, international military volunteers in Ukraine should not be considered mercenaries, as they sign official contracts with Kyiv's army and share both responsibilities and salaries with other regular soldiers.

What sets Alexander and José Aron's case apart is that they are the first combatants detained in a third country unrelated to the war.

This marks yet another red line crossed by Putin, and the message is clear from the Russian despot: no one is safe from the Kremlin's grasp.

What is to be done? Mr Uscátegui's team filed a forced disappearance complaint at the International Criminal Court in December.

This crime is notoriously difficult to prosecute, as it requires evidence of systematic attacks against a specific civilian group.

To strengthen the case, the complaint includes other Colombians who vanished after crossing into Venezuela.

Yet, official indifference remains the greatest obstacle to building the political pressure needed for their release.

"I'd like to speak to that man Petro. I voted for him!" Otilia exclaims, her voice trembling as she talks about Gustavo Petro, Colombia's president.

"He's from around here, from El Tambo. A country boy, just like us. He used to be poor, like me, and God gave him the gift of becoming president," she says.

Alexander's mother prays he will one day visit the Cauca Valley. She imagines wrapping the Colombian flag "like a dress" around her and throwing herself at his feet in the street.

Cielo is less optimistic. "If our president were a different man… but this one was once a guerrillero," she sighs, as her daughter reaches for her phone as she struggles to cope with the loss of her father.

José Aron's daughter Samara spends many hours alone and her hope of seeing her father again soon diminishes every day Credit: Fermin Torrano

"My husband and Alexander are retired Colombian soldiers; they fought for our country. Why won't he help them? Yet for another guerrillero he sent a letter asking for extradition."

She is referring to the US-Colombian embassy plea for the release of Simón Trinidad, a former Farc commander serving a 60-year sentence in a US prison.

On Nov 25 last year, officials justified the request with appeals to "humanitarian spirit" – the same rhetoric Petro used when urging the Trump administration to show dignity in the deportation of migrants.

But no such calls have been made for Alexander or José Aron.

For six months, Colombia's diplomatic corps has remained silent. The foreign