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Arepa investment leads to Interpol notice and bitter Miami court fight

By Antonio María Delgado

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Celestino Diaz thought he was building the Venezuelan answer to Chipotle.

The plan was ambitious but straightforward: Start with a small arepa restaurant in New York, gradually add locations and, within five to seven years, build a 15-store chain. Among the investors was Omar Gerardo Camero, a member of the family behind Televen, one of Venezuela’s largest television networks. The two families had known each other for decades.

“The idea was to build an arepa chain like Chipotle, just in New York,” Diaz said in an interview.

The pandemic battered the business, and the restaurants eventually closed. But the fight over the money was only beginning. It would lead to arbitration in New York, criminal accusations in Venezuela, an arrest warrant, an Interpol Red Notice and reports about Diaz on Venezuelan television.

The dispute is now before a Miami-Dade judge.

Diaz has sued Camero and two companies tied to Televen in Miami-Dade Circuit Court, alleging that Camero transformed a dispute over his $1.09 million investment in Areppas into a years-long campaign to force Diaz to pay him millions of dollars — using threats, Venezuela's criminal justice system and, ultimately, his family's media company to apply pressure.

Camero and the Televen companies haven't been found liable for those allegations, and many of Diaz's most serious claims remain allegations contained in his lawsuit. Camero and Televen attorneys declined to comment to the Miami Herald, citing the pending litigation.

"In essence, this is a case where people are using the situation in Venezuela and the lack of judicial oversight and judicial independence to extort people," said Gábor Gazsó von Klingspor, an attorney at Diaz Reus representing Diaz.

A restaurant built for growth

Diaz began developing Areppas in 2015, according to the lawsuit. He said the concept was designed as a long-term investment rather than a business expected to produce quick returns.

Camero joined the venture through a longstanding relationship between their families. Diaz said his father had been friends with Camero's father and at one point served on Televen's board.

"I knew Mr. Camero because my father was very good friends with his father," Diaz said. "It was a close relationship."

According to the lawsuit, Camero initially invested $420,000 for a 30% interest in the original company. As Areppas expanded, he made additional capital contributions totaling $670,000, bringing his overall investment to $1.09 million and giving him a 23.7% interest in a Delaware holding company established for the business. Other investors also joined the venture.

By 2019, Areppas had three locations. Then came the pandemic.

As New York imposed restrictions and restaurant traffic collapsed in early 2020, Areppas' finances deteriorated. According to the lawsuit, Camero told Diaz on Feb. 25, 2020, that he wanted to sell his interest and began pushing Diaz to arrange a sale or buyout.

Diaz alleges that Camero eventually demanded that he personally pay about $10 million — nearly 10 times Camero’s total investment — and later reduced the demand to $2 million.

“He would call me and tell me that it would be an honor for me to buy him out for $10 million,” Diaz said. “He invested $1.09 million.”

Emails provided to the Miami Herald show that Camero was also demanding that Diaz return money. In a June 5, 2020, email, Camero wrote that Diaz owed him $100,000, plus the $1.09 million investment and interest. The email described the $100,000 separately as money Camero had lent Diaz to help him start a business. It is unclear from the email whether that amount was connected to the Areppas investment.

“Pay me, give me back my money,” Camero wrote in Spanish. “I can write everything off as a loss in a couple of weeks. But I swear on my children that you will lose much, much more.”

Camero did not explain in the email what he meant by “you will lose much, much more.” Diaz says it was a threat.

Diaz told the Herald that Camero did not explicitly put in writing a threat to use his media properties against him. Diaz said Camero did write that he would “destroy” him and that Diaz’s brother received a message in which Camero threatened to “go to war” against him.

The fight over the investment

Camero’s company, Whiteswan Corp., eventually took the dispute to arbitration in New York, pursuing claims against Areppas LLC and CID Corp. before the American Arbitration Association.

In May 2022, the parties signed an agreement dismissing the arbitration without prejudice. The agreement also provided Whiteswan and its forensic examiners access to Areppas’ financial information and certain personnel. The agreement did not adjudicate the merits of Camero’s allegations.

More than two years later, on Aug. 21, 2024, the International Centre for Dispute Resolution formally marked the matter closed after receiving correspondence from the claimant confirming that it could be closed. The ICDR said reopening the matter would require filing a new notice of arbitration and paying the appropriate filing fee.

The case moves to Venezuela

In April 2024, according to Diaz’s lawsuit, Camero filed a private criminal complaint with Venezuelan authorities accusing Diaz and his father of fraud arising from the Areppas investment.

Diaz maintains that the accusations were false and that Camero was attempting to turn a failed investment and civil dispute into a criminal case.

Venezuelan prosecutors later summoned Diaz and his father on allegations of fraud and criminal association. Diaz also alleges that Camero used political connections and bribery to influence prosecutors and obtain criminal action against him. Those allegations have not been independently established by the documents reviewed by the Herald.

According to the lawsuit, a Venezuelan court ruled in November 2024 that there had not been a thorough criminal investigation and that the evidence was insufficient to conclude Diaz had committed a criminal act in Venezuela.

A second court ruled the following month that it lacked jurisdiction because Camero’s accusations were civil and commercial in nature and had been addressed in the Areppas arbitration. The complaint says prosecutors nevertheless pursued the matter before another court, which subsequently issued an arrest warrant for Diaz.

In December 2025, according to the lawsuit, a Venezuelan appeals court affirmed the earlier ruling that the courts lacked jurisdiction over Camero’s accusations.

Venezuela also obtained an Interpol Red Notice against Diaz in 2025, according to the complaint. A Red Notice is a request to law enforcement agencies around the world to locate and provisionally arrest someone pending extradition or similar legal action. It is not itself an international arrest warrant.

Diaz says the notice had consequences in the United States. According to his lawsuit, the Department of Homeland Security revoked his Global Entry account in June 2025. Diaz says he has since avoided international travel because he fears being detained and potentially extradited to Venezuela.

Gazsó von Klingspor said Interpol headquarters in France has since temporarily blocked access to the Red Notice while reviewing it. He said no final determination has been made, but Diaz's legal team expects the notice ultimately to be removed.

The Televen broadcasts

Diaz alleges that Camero, whose family controls Televen, directed the network to publicize the criminal allegations against him.

According to Florida corporate records cited in the lawsuit, Camero is a director and vice president of Televen International, the network's Florida affiliate, while his father, Omar Camero Zamora, is a director and its president. The complaint describes the younger Camero as a founding director and executive vice president of Televen's Venezuelan operation.

In September 2025, Televen broadcast a report about Diaz and posted it online.

"The Interpol main office in France has approved the inclusion of Celestino Ignacio Díaz Fernández on its red list of wanted persons," the Spanish-language report said, according to a translation included in the lawsuit. "He is accused of committing the crimes of aggravated fraud and criminal association."

The report was broadcast on Televen and distributed through YouTube, X and Instagram.

Diaz's defamation claim focuses largely on what he says Televen left out of its reports. Diaz argues that the broadcasts created the impression that he was the subject of a legitimate criminal investigation while failing to tell viewers that Camero was himself behind the original accusations, that they grew out of the failed Areppas investment and that Venezuelan courts had previously questioned or rejected attempts to treat the dispute as a criminal matter.

The lawsuit accuses all three defendants of libel by implication and Camero separately of libel. Diaz alleges the broadcasts damaged his reputation, cost him business opportunities and increased the risk he faces from Venezuelan authorities.

He is seeking compensatory damages, interest and costs and has reserved the right to seek punitive damages.