

Hundreds of migrants in ICE custody go “missing” as deportees are jailed in El Salvador’s “terrorism” prison

Andrea Lobo
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Following its invocation of the 18th-century Alien Enemies Act on Saturday, claiming an invasion by a Venezuelan gang to justify mass deportations without any due process or legal recourse, the Trump administration is employing tactics reminiscent of the disappearances used by fascist military dictatorships in the last century.

Hundreds of migrants are being dragged out of their homes, arrested while making routine appointments with US immigration authorities or intercepted in the street at all hours, often by plainclothes officials, and taken to unknown locations. Lawyers and relatives struggle to find their whereabouts as records are erased or falsified online. Some, accused on an entirely arbitrary basis of being “terrorists” or belonging to gangs, turn up in what are effectively concentration camps overseen by security forces with long records of torture, extrajudicial killings, and fascist repression.

These actions, which can only be described as transnational fascism, are not taking place in Spain, Italy or Germany in the 1930s or under the CIA’s “Operation Condor” that coordinated cross-border repression between Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s, but in North America in 2025.

On Wednesday, *Univision* issued the alarming report that there is an ongoing “frantic search among terrified families after hundreds of immigrants go missing from the ICE online locator.” This includes at least 48 people picked up during a series of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids last week in New Mexico and put on a plane to an unknown destination.

Many are feared among the estimated 300 Venezuelan and Salvadoran migrants who were immediately sent to the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) in El Salvador—the largest prison in the Americas—in defiance of a US federal court order challenging the use of the Alien Enemies Act and pausing the deportations.

The Trump administration has not only refused the judge’s

request to disclose additional information about the two deportation flights to El Salvador. On Monday night, ICE official Robert Cerna recognized in a sworn statement that “many” deported Venezuelans lacked criminal records, making the nonsensical argument that the lack of information on the deportees “actually highlights the risk they pose.”

The fascistic President of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, featured a propagandistic video of troops and police overseeing the manhandling and humiliation of the migrants as they arrived in what is a sprawling torture center.

Bukele thanked the Trump administration for the fee of \$6 million to house the migrants for a year and for the forced labor that will be extracted, claiming this will make the Salvadoran prison system self-sustainable.

The United States also deported 23 alleged members of the Salvadoran gang Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13, which was also declared a “foreign terrorist organization” by the Trump administration. Ominously, Bukele said that getting his hands on these alleged members, including two “ringleaders,” would “help us finalize intelligence gathering and go after the last remnants of MS-13.” This can only mean interrogations and torture.

Relatives and lawyers of Venezuelan deportees have gone to media outlets and social media to insist that those sent to CECOT have no affiliation with the Tren de Aragua gang, which the Trump administration accuses of an “invasion of the United States.”

The *Washington Post* reported that four men were deported because of unrelated tattoos, including one commemorating the birth of a man’s child. Experts cited by the corporate media have indicated that the Tren de Aragua does not have any tattoos that identify members.

The *Miami Herald* cites three more cases, including that of a migrant who worked installing pipes after entering the United States legally by requesting asylum in December 2023. He was arrested in early February while taking the

trash out, according to his pregnant wife.

Lindsay Toczyłowski, a lawyer for one of the Venezuelans sent to El Salvador, described the deportations as “psychological warfare” and “the most shocking thing” she has seen in her career. Her client is an LGBTQ+ artist and a “very sweet [and] normal guy” who fled repression in Venezuela and had passed a “credible fear interview” in applying for asylum, she explained.

On Tuesday, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro denounced Bukele for “creating concentration camps and throwing good people in jail without trials,” insisting that the detainees were arrested just for being Venezuelan migrants or having a tattoo. He cited the example of two men from the Venezuelan state of Zulia who turned themselves in to US authorities to be deported and were robbed of their goods and money, and sent to El Salvador. “This is called fascism and Nazism,” he said.

While Maduro is partly seeking to save face after reaching a deal with the Trump administration to receive deportees and even sending planes to pick them up in Texas, this description of the CECOT prison and the Bukele regime is not hyperbole.

Since launching an ongoing state of exception in 2022, suspending constitutional rights, Bukele has arrested 87,000 people, more than 1 percent of the population. Thousands were summarily detained and sentenced in mass trials. The human rights organization Cristosal has issued reports of hundreds of deaths of detainees from malnutrition, beatings and lack of medical treatment. An analysis of exhumed victims found signs of torture, leading to the conclusion that torture is a “state policy” under Bukele.

The US State Department’s own 2023 country report for El Salvador points to “credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings; enforced disappearance; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by security forces; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary...”

Conditions in the mega-prison are equivalent to torture. Inmates in overcrowded cells are allocated 0.6 square meters each. They sleep on cots that lack mattresses, sheets or pillows. Lights remain on 24/7 and guards constantly monitor cells destroying any sense of privacy. There is no contact with the outside world. Utensils for eating are prohibited, and water access is strictly regulated.

As of mid-March, the Trump administration claims that all migrants detained in another overseas concentration camp in Guantanamo Bay, a US-occupied territory in Cuba, were relocated to Louisiana after it became clear that claims that the detainees were “high-threat” Tren de Aragua members were false. But US officials insist that the facility, which has

long been a torture center, will eventually be used again to detain migrants.

Beyond the CECOT and Guantánamo, the Trump administration has created a broad, extraterritorial detention and deportation network to places that human rights lawyers have called legal “black holes,” where migrant workers arrive in chains and, until recently, on military planes.

The Trump administration reached deals with Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama to hold migrants indefinitely until their fates are decided.

The Costa Rican ombudsman Angie Cruickshank denounced the mistreatment of Venezuelan migrants following the arrival of new deportees from the United States. She indicated that they have been sent to overcrowded “modules” without adequate meals, mattresses or bottled water, and are denied use of the internet or phones.

Earlier this month, the Panamanian government liberated about 65 migrants from a detention center in the inhospitable Darien jungle, amid growing outrage caused by reports on their treatment. The migrants, mostly from Central Asia, were deprived of their phones and held in unsanitary conditions without legal counsel or information. These migrants were then thrown into the street and left in limbo without money or being able to speak Spanish. Aid groups identified at least three who needed medical attention because they were not given treatment or medicines.

One migrant told the Associated Press that Panamanian armed guards cracked down violently on a protest, while a Chinese migrant carried out a hunger strike for a week.

Within the United States, the Trump administration has reopened facilities for the detention of families with children for deportation. Numerous human rights reports have exposed these “baby prisons” which are run for profit, for inflicting trauma resulting from sexual and other forms of abuse and a failure to provide for basic needs.

The move has raised fears among advocacy groups of a return of family separation and detention to the dog kennels without showers, beds or sufficient food that created a public outrage under the first Trump administration.



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