

# Kilmar Abrego Garcia was tortured in El Salvador's CECOT prison

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A new lawsuit alleges that Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a 29-year-old Maryland resident, was tortured inside the CECOT mega-prison in El Salvador after being illegally deported by the Trump administration in violation of a 2019 federal court order. The court had barred his removal on the grounds that he faced death threats from criminal gangs in his native El Salvador for refusing to join.

After months of stonewalling, Abrego Garcia was abruptly returned to the United States on June 6 following a growing wave of public opposition to Trump's mass deportation drive.

CECOT, short for "Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo" (Center for the Confinement of Terrorism), is a maximum-security prison more accurately described as a concentration camp. It is operated by El Salvador's authoritarian president Nayib Bukele, a close ally of Trump. Of the more than 250 men deported there by the US government this past March, the vast majority have never been convicted of any crime and were forcibly removed after Trump fraudulently invoked the Alien Enemies Act.

According to the lawsuit, upon arrival to El Salvador Abrego Garcia was told, "Welcome to CECOT. Whoever enters here doesn't leave." He was then forced to strip, issued prison clothing, and subjected to physical abuse, including being kicked in the legs with boots and struck on the head and arms to force him to change faster. After his head was shaved, he was frog-marched to his cell while guards beat him with wooden batons. The following day, he had visible bruises and welts all over his body.

The complaint also alleges that Abrego Garcia was forced to kneel from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m., with guards beating anyone who collapsed from exhaustion. The enforced kneeling, combined with harsh 24-hour

lighting, caused severe sleep deprivation, according to the filing. Other allegations include that he was deliberately starved—losing 30 pounds (13.6 kilograms) in two weeks—denied access to bathroom facilities, and threatened by prison officials with being transferred to cells with gang members who, they warned, would "tear him apart."

If the allegations are true—which multiple human rights organizations suggest is likely the case—these abuses would constitute blatant violations of the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibits "cruel and unusual punishment." In fact, Human Rights Watch and the ACLU have documented that torture and inhumane treatment at CECOT appear to be part of a routine system, not isolated incidents, reinforcing credible concerns that Abrego Garcia's allegations reflect institutionalized barbarism.

The treatment at CECOT recalls the torture chambers of Guantanamo Bay—rapidly expanded under Trump—and Abu Ghraib, where detainees were subjected to similar methods of abuse and held illegally by the US military. The key difference is that today, the victims are people from the United States itself.

If Trump's fascist lie about immigrants being an "invading army" were true—which it is not—his treatment of them would constitute a war crime under international law.

The Geneva Conventions explicitly prohibit "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture" of captured combatants. They also forbid "outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment."

Both the Bukele government in El Salvador and the Trump administration defied a federal court order barring Kilmar Abrego Garcia's deportation and later

obstructed his return to the United States. The lawsuit notes that top White House and Department of Homeland Security officials—including Attorney General Pam Bondi, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, the official DHS account on X (formerly Twitter), and others—openly defied the rulings of both the federal district court and the US Supreme Court. This coordinated refusal to comply with court orders demonstrates the Trump administration’s open contempt for the rule of law and its authoritarian drive to carry out mass deportations.

This obstruction was driven in large part by fear that the conditions inside CECOT would be exposed to the public. In an effort at damage control, both Trump and Bukele falsely claimed that Abrego Garcia was “fine” in El Salvador. Bukele’s government even released a video showing Abrego Garcia after he had been moved out of CECOT to another facility, the Centro Industrial prison. According to court documents, Abrego Garcia and four other detainees were also temporarily relocated to a different section of CECOT where they were photographed with mattresses and improved food—an obvious propaganda stunt aimed at whitewashing the torture and inhumane treatment they had endured.

Even though Abrego Garcia has been returned to the United States, the Trump administration continues to seek his deportation, relying on the bogus and slanderous claim that he has ties to the MS-13 gang. To date, the government has produced no evidence whatsoever to substantiate this accusation, even after a federal judge ordered it to do so.

Abrego Garcia has never been convicted of any crime and complied with all Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) check-ins until his illegal deportation. The baseless smear is part of the Trump administration’s broader campaign to criminalize immigrants and justify mass deportations through lies and fearmongering.

Abrego Garcia’s lawsuit argues that his deportation is illegal under the Convention Against Torture (CAT), which is implemented in US law through the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998. The law prohibits the government from deporting anyone to a country where they are “more likely than not” to face torture, whether directly by the government or with its acquiescence. This legal protection stands in addition to

the 2019 federal court order that already barred his removal. In Abrego Garcia’s case, the legal standard is not hypothetical—he was, in fact, tortured in the very country to which the Trump administration seeks to return him.

Trump intends to use concentration camps like CECOT and the Dade-Collier Training and Transition Facility in Florida, which he has dubbed “Alligator Alcatraz,” not only against immigrants but as a permanent apparatus of repression targeting residents and citizens in the United States. The description of these facilities as “concentration camps” is not rhetorical exaggeration but an accurate, scientific definition. They are designed to detain large numbers of people without due process, through methods of terror, violence, and dehumanization.

Recently released US college graduate and Texas homeowner Ward Sakeik described her five-month imprisonment in three separate ICE detention centers, exposing the inhuman conditions of the US immigration system. She described the facilities as “extremely unhygienic, dust everywhere,” with women “getting sick left and right because it is extremely dusty.” Some facilities were kept freezing cold, while others were infested with insects. Sakeik recounted being transported “like cattle” and thrown into small cages packed with women, with only a single toilet, stripped of dignity and basic human rights.

The latest tax and spending bill, the so-called “Big Beautiful Bill,” signed into law by Trump on July 4, allocates \$45 billion for the expansion of a nationwide network of ICE concentration camps within the US. At the opening ceremony for the Florida facility, which has since flooded, Trump made clear that the target is not only immigrants but also citizens. “But we also have a lot of bad people that have been here for a long time,” he declared. “They are not new to our country, they are old to our country. Many of them were born in our country. I think we ought to get them the hell out of here too.”



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