

Mexico's Sheinbaum orders arrest of prominent immigrant rights activist in bow to Trump

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12 August 2025

The arrest of Luis Rey García Villagrán, a prominent defender of immigrant rights and longtime organizer of migrant caravans through Mexico, marks a major escalation in the assault on democratic rights by the government of President Claudia Sheinbaum and its collaboration with the fascistic US administration of Donald Trump.

The timing is unmistakable: Federal agents swooped in on García as he left a public meeting held in a park last Tuesday in final preparations for the departure of another migrant caravan the following day from the southernmost city of Tapachula, Chiapas. Significantly, the military took part in the operation to arrest him.

Despite the arrest, approximately 300 migrants departed Wednesday en route to Monterrey in northern Mexico. Marching behind the banners “Exodus for Justice” and “Migration is not a Crime,” the caravan combined the protection and access to aid facilitated by numbers with a protest against Sheinbaum’s collaboration with Trump’s assault on migrants, as well as delays and denials of asylum claims within Mexico.

Caravan participants include entire families, children and elderly from across South and Central America, the Caribbean and Africa, with many telling the media that they have spent months seeking to sort out their immigration situation in Mexico.

This is the first caravan where migrants state as their aim reaching and settling in cities within Mexico, apparently having given up for now on their original goal of crossing the US border.

On Monday, the caravan had reached the city of Escuintla, where they rejected an attempt by the National Migration Institute (INM) to disband the caravan by offering to take them in buses ostensibly to “shelters.” The migrants easily saw through the threadbare tactic to divide and detain them, knowing that in previous cases the INM has sent migrants back south away from their destination or deported them outright.

“If you want to help us, just give us permission to go to Mexico City or Monterrey, here where we are, we don’t want to go to shelters,” one migrant told *El Universal*.

President Sheinbaum commented on the arrest of García Villagrán on Wednesday. Interrupting a reporter’s question, she delivered what amounted to a verdict before any trial: “He is not an activist. He had an arrest warrant and is linked to human trafficking.”

Federal authorities have accused García Villagrán of involvement in organized crime, human trafficking, and using his NGO as a front to traffic migrants and potentially drugs. These frame-up accusations are aimed at intimidating any opposition to the Sheinbaum administration’s deepening and servile cooperation with Trump’s fascist onslaught against migrants.

In 2022, García Villagrán, a trained lawyer who worked for the judiciary, was arrested briefly on similar charges, amid baseless claims by prosecutors that he charges migrants and puts them in more peril by organizing caravans.

In 1997, he served a 12-year prison sentence for kidnapping, after an initial 40-year prison sentence.

It is striking how few reports even mention the outcome or background of his case or the work carried out by his organization in the corporate media’s malicious attempt to justify his most recent detention. Human rights organizations signed a statement denouncing the detention and reporting that several news reporters said that their corporate bosses gave them instructions not to contradict the president’s official version.

In 2003, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights accepted a complaint filed by García Villagrán’s former wife charging that police tortured him into confessing to these crimes and that he was deprived of medical treatment and kept incommunicado. The report indicates that physical abuse led him to lose sight in his right eye, following a recent surgery.

Amnesty International also published a report explaining that police “blindfolded him, tied him to a tree, and began punching him in the back and striking him with a knife in various parts of his body.” He was taken to the police station, where “they put him in a tank full of water and tied him to a pipe with his hands at shoulder height.”

After being denied a lawyer and being repeatedly beaten, he

was threatened with being “disappeared,” referring to the repression tactic used by Latin American police state regimes, including the Mexican, carrying out extra-judicial executions and then concealing the remains and the fate of their victims—a practice now being echoed by the Trump administration in its disappearing of immigrants into foreign jails.

After freeng García Villagrán in December 2017, the right-wing administration of Enrique Peña Nieto felt compelled to offer him a public apology.

For years, he has provided support to migrants crossing Mexico as founder and leader of the NGO Centro de Dignificación Humana AC. The organization has provided legal guidance and humanitarian assistance to thousands fleeing violence, poverty and oppression throughout Central America and beyond in hope of finding safety and a decent life in the United States.

He had become particularly outspoken about the corruption of the Mexican immigration authorities and business sectors, as well as their ties to organized crime. As a result, he faced numerous death threats and two attacks.

The caravans themselves are not a plot or political conspiracy, but rather a phenomenon that emerged in 2018 as the outcome of grinding poverty, state repression and gang violence throughout the region, driving families, women and children into a desperate search for security and a future.

Now, Sheinbaum’s administration justifies García Villagrán’s arrest with an aged warrant for “trafficking”—a common tactic used to tar those who resist anti-immigrant clampdowns.

García’s arrest can only be understood in the broader context of Sheinbaum’s embrace of militarized border repression in direct obedience to the demands of the Trump administration. In February 2025, under threat of punishing US tariffs, Sheinbaum struck a deal with Trump to deploy an additional 10,000 National Guard troops to key border cities. Far from an isolated incident, this concession followed repeated episodes since 2019 where Mexican forces blocked, detained and violently dispersed migrant caravans under US pressure.

This militarized crackdown has frequently turned lethal. One of the most notorious recent episodes occurred in October 2024, when Mexican soldiers opened fire on a crowded truck near Huixtla, Chiapas, killing six migrants and injuring 10 others, some fatally, as they attempted to flee a military patrol. Such tragedies are not anomalies, but the systemic outcome of a strategy that treats human beings as threats and border regions as zones of military occupation.

The “success” of these fascist measures is now being trumpeted by both US and Mexican officials. New Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data show historic lows in daily apprehensions—just 88 migrants detained one day in July, the lowest figure in the agency’s history. Monthly totals for border encounters have also plummeted to previously unseen levels, which is not the result of any genuine resolution of the causes

of migration, but due to the overwhelming climate of fear and the brutal enforcement actions carried out on both sides of the border.

Much of this “success” is owed to mass detentions and new sites like the so-called “Alligator Alcatraz” detention camp in the Florida Everglades, which has already become a site of rapid deportations and gross abuses. Such facilities amount to concentration camps set up to terrorize and contain immigrants, with scant due process or oversight.

Sheinbaum’s nominally left-nationalist Morena party has not only gone out of its way to deploy the security apparatus against refugees, trampling Mexico’s own constitutional and international law. Her administration is mirroring the fascist White House in taking calculated steps to exploit the criminalization of migrants to justify preparations for repression of social opposition and police-state dictatorship.

Launched as part of the broader Public Security National Strategy, the Sheinbaum administration’s latest moves include the National Guard Constitutional Reform, rushed through Congress, which upgrades the force into a federalized branch of the military, with sweeping new powers for warrantless investigation and intelligence gathering. This is a blueprint for martial law.

The new laws also target the very foundation of public security, giving even greater “superpowers” to Omar García Harfuch’s Security Ministry through reforms to the General Law for the National Systems of Public Security, Investigation and Intelligence. These enable preventative and repressive actions against any group that the state deems a threat—including labor activists, journalists and social movements.

These “reforms” are directed above all against the Mexican working class. In the context of staggering inequality across Mexico and the mounting crisis of global capitalism, the ruling class seeks nothing less than a permanent state of emergency to guarantee the flow of cheap labor and secure supply chains for international capital, all at the expense of basic social and democratic rights.



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