

Deportees on flight from the United States die in Venezuelan earthquake

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Almost all the Venezuelans deported from the United States who arrived on Flight 164 at Simón Bolívar International Airport were killed by the catastrophic earthquakes of June 24, having landed only six hours earlier.

The group—120 men, 19 women, five boys and two girls—had been processed through arrival protocols and taken under Venezuelan state intelligence (SEBIN) custody to the Hotel Santuario La Llanada, a spare government facility in La Guaira where migrants are locked in and subjected to medical checks and identity document procedures.

At 6 p.m., the 7.2- and 7.5-magnitude earthquakes knocked down the entire building. Of the 147 deportees, only 12 survived.

Their deaths deepen and magnify the crime perpetrated by US imperialism against the Venezuelan working class: the US government expelled them like criminals after deliberately destroying their home country's economy, where decades of US sanctions and colonial plunder left the infrastructure incapable of withstanding the earth's movement, and then had the local puppet authorities lock them in a death trap.

The official toll across the country stands at 1,450 dead, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that more than 50,000 people are reported missing.

Several of the twelve survivors are in critical condition. Anderson Daniel Salcedo Lozano, 21 years old, arrived at Caracas's José María Vargas hospital intubated and with both legs amputated.

Another survivor, also in the intensive care unit, described to *El País* what happened in the final moments before the building came down. The deportees, he said, screamed and begged the SEBIN guards to open the doors as the tremors began. The guards did not open them.

"How is it possible that they bring them from over there, where they went to look for a better life, and hold them in detention?" Yulis Salcedo, Anderson's mother, told *El País* through tears. "Why didn't they open the door if they knew they had no criminal records? I have so much pain, so much.

My son already wanted to return to his country, because the United States government didn't let him work there, and look how they receive them here—like prisoners, like detainees."

Joan, 28, one of the twelve survivors, had been detained by ICE on June 13 while driving to work in Florida, where his six-year-old daughter and wife Daniela remained. He was about to sleep in a bunk when the hotel began to shake. He managed to put on his shoes and a shirt, took three long strides toward the door and shouted "It's an earthquake, it's an earthquake!"—and the building came down on him. He survived because a bunk bed fell over him and the mattresses absorbed the weight of the debris. He spent three hours clawing his way out through the rubble. When he emerged, he tried to rescue others.

Until Spanish-language media outlets broke the story Sunday night, international corporate media observed total silence on the fate of the deportees. Into Monday evening, only fragmentary references appeared buried in a handful of US outlets.

The nightmare from the Darién to the rubble in La Guaira

To understand who the people on flight 164 were, one must understand what it took for them to reach the United States in the first place. Of the more than 8 million Venezuelans who fled the country's economic collapse between 2014 and the present—driven by sanctions, the implosion of oil revenues and the failures of Chavismo—only a fraction ever reached US territory.

To do so, they crossed the Darién Gap, the roadless jungle on the Colombia-Panama border where thousands have died from drowning, exhaustion and violence. Those who survived continued through Central America and Mexico, traversing territory surveilled by militarized forces and

controlled by criminal organizations, subject to kidnapping, extortion, rape and murder.

Those who made it to the US border after 2021 were granted Temporary Protected Status—a recognition, however minimal, that conditions in Venezuela made deportation tantamount to punishment.

Under the second Trump administration, Venezuelans have been subjected to constant, fascistic repression. On February 3, 2025, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem terminated the 2023 TPS (Temporary Protected Status) designation for approximately 350,000 Venezuelans, declaring it “contrary to the national interest.” The Supreme Court allowed the termination to take immediate effect in October 2025. Noem also vacated the eighteen-month extension of TPS that the Biden administration had granted, cutting short protections ahead of the original October 2026 deadline.

Throughout this campaign, US officials repeatedly dehumanized Venezuelan migrants, with Noem repeatedly calling them “dirtbags” and Tren de Aragua gang members in news interviews. Trump himself demanded that Venezuela accept “all of the prisoners and people from mental institutions,” portraying those expelled as insane criminals.

Venezuelan migrants were dragged from their homes, arrested while making routine appointments with immigration authorities or intercepted in the street at all hours, often by plainclothes officials, and taken to unknown locations.

Hundreds were shipped to Guantánamo Bay on the basis of alleged gang ties—allegations so flimsy that some Venezuelans were detained and transferred to Guantánamo solely for having tattoos, even though Tren de Aragua members do not typically use specific tattoos as part of their initiation process.

In March 2025, 238 Venezuelans were deported to El Salvador’s Terrorism Confinement Center—a maximum-security facility—without due process, without trial, without sentencing, in defiance of a federal court order.

The timing of the disaster carries its own political symbolism. On the same day as the earthquakes, June 24, the US Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Mullin v. Doe*, deciding 6–3 along ideological lines that federal courts have no power to review the Department of Homeland Security’s decisions to designate, extend or terminate Temporary Protected Status.

The decision will permit the Trump administration to return to federal court in other cases and overturn decisions that had ruled against the termination of TPS for Venezuela and other countries.

The likelihood that Trump will extend protections to Venezuelans was summed up in a speech in the wake of the

earthquake, where he said: “Outside of the earthquake, the people are happy and dancing in the streets.”

Most of the 135 migrant workers who died in the Hotel Santuario La Llanada crossed the Darién on foot. They survived deserts, militaries and criminal organizations. Washington stripped them of their legal status and deported them, while the Venezuelan puppet state continued this treatment, causing their deaths.

The Supreme Court ruling issued on the same day as the earthquake—facilitating the mass deportation of over 600,000 Venezuelans into a country now experiencing its worst disaster in over a century—was not a coincidence.

More than 5,000 Venezuelans remain in ICE detention, awaiting deportation to a country where hundreds of buildings have collapsed or been severely damaged, even as more than 300 aftershocks—including a significant 5.1-magnitude tremor on Monday—threaten the compromised buildings.

Every one of those responsible for the massacre of those on flight 164—in Washington, in Caracas, in the boardrooms of the oil and mining corporations now stripping Venezuela of its wealth—must be held to account.

The demand for Venezuelans to be made whole and for the criminals who robbed Venezuela, reimposed colonial shackles, and sent these deportees to their deaths be brought to justice, however, cannot be left to the institutions of the capitalist state or the trade union bureaucracies and pseudo-left organizations that channel working-class opposition behind the same order responsible for the mass death.

What is required is a complete and conscious break from that straitjacket: the building of a politically independent movement of the working class in Venezuela, across Latin America and internationally, armed with a socialist program and oriented toward the overthrow of the capitalist system.



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