Under threat of deportation to Liberia, Kilmar Abrego Garcia leaves US for Spain

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Kilmar Abrego Garcia, the Maryland sheet metal worker whom the Trump administration illegally deported to a Salvadoran torture prison in March 2025, arrived in Madrid Wednesday morning with his wife, Jennifer Vasquez Sura. Before he could board the commercial flight at Washington Dulles International Airport Tuesday night, federal authorities had to remove the GPS monitor strapped to his ankle. A federal judge had ordered them to do so.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) celebrated his "self-deportation." For more than a year, Abrego Garcia had been willing to leave for Costa Rica, whose government had offered to receive him and protect him from being sent back to El Salvador. The Trump administration insisted on the power to choose where he would go. Its preferred destination was Liberia, a West African country where he had no ties.

Speaking from Spain, Abrego Garcia said, "The government did not decide where my story continues. My family and I decide our future." His attorney, Simon Sandoval-Moshenberg, described the departure as "temporary." In a statement reported by the BBC, he said the family expected that "the next administration will prioritise reunifying this family and bringing him back to Maryland." Abrego Garcia has a US citizen wife and son. His lawyer said a return would require a waiver he does not expect the Trump administration to grant.

The November 20 order by US District Judge Paula Xinis, unsealed Wednesday, spells out what it took to get Abrego Garcia safely onto a plane. Officials had to lift any alert that might lead to his detention or prevent him from boarding. Xinis expressly forbade them to ask "any air carrier, common carrier, or person to detain, divert, or delay" his journey or to arrange for him to be sent elsewhere. The same order directed the government to record his departure as the execution of his removal order.

Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin declared Tuesday, "Now, this El Salvadoran man cannot terrorize innocent Americans." His department branded Abrego Garcia a "Human Trafficker, Wife Beater, and MS-13 Gang Member" in the headline of its press release. Further down the page, DHS retreated to "suspected" and "accused." It cited no criminal conviction for any of these claims. The one criminal case the administration brought against him ended in dismissal at the trial court.

Abrego Garcia had lived in the United States since he was a teenager. He was raising three children in Maryland with Vasquez Sura and working as a union sheet metal apprentice. On March 12, 2025, he finished a shift in Baltimore and picked up his five-year-old son from the boy's grandmother. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents pulled him over with the child in the back seat. According to the family's court filing, agents gave Vasquez Sura 10 minutes to collect her son before they would turn him over to child protective services.

Three days later, the government flew him to El Salvador in violation of a 2019 immigration court order barring his return because he faced persecution there. More than 250 men were delivered to President Nayib Bukele's Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) that weekend. Trump had invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 against Venezuelans he claimed belonged to a gang called Tren de Aragua. The flights went on to El Salvador despite District Judge James Boasberg's instruction to turn back planes carrying men covered by his order. Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran, had his own protective court order. Of the 238 Venezuelans sent to CECOT, *60 Minutes* could find no criminal record for 179.

In court filings, Abrego Garcia described guards kicking him and striking him with wooden batons as they marched him to his cell. They forced prisoners to kneel from 9 at night until 6 in the morning and beat those who collapsed. Held without access to his lawyers and given so little food that he lost 30 pounds in two weeks, he was later transferred to another Salvadoran prison. Other prisoners later told Human Rights Watch that the water they had to drink was sometimes green and contained visible vermin.

As protests spread in Maryland and across the country, Trump circulated an altered photograph of Abrego Garcia's hand where the letters and numerals "MS-13" had been

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superimposed above his finger tattoos. Trump presented them as proof of gang membership.

On April 10, 2025, the Supreme Court upheld the requirement that the government facilitate his release. The administration waited until June 6 to bring him back, by which time it had secured a bogus federal indictment in Tennessee. The human smuggling charges grew out of a 2022 traffic stop at which state troopers had let him go without so much as a ticket. In August 2025, his lawyers reported that prosecutors were offering removal to Costa Rica in exchange for a guilty plea. When he refused, ICE threatened to send him to Uganda and seized him at a Baltimore check-in. Xinis ordered him released in December. On May 22, 2026, Federal Judge Waverly Crenshaw dismissed the Tennessee indictment after prosecutors failed to rebut the claim of vindictive prosecution. The Justice Department has appealed.

Cornell University doctoral student Momodou Taal faced a similar choice in March 2025. After Taal challenged Trump's executive orders targeting opponents of the Gaza genocide, the government directed him to surrender to ICE. When a judge declined to block his detention, the British-Gambian student left the United States. "I have lost faith I could walk the streets without being abducted," he wrote. In January 2026, British police detained him at Heathrow Airport and interrogated him for six hours under anti-terrorism powers. In both cases the US government secured an immigrant's departure through the threat of imprisonment without having to win a criminal conviction.

The administration's insistence on deportation to Liberia also served a wider purpose. In a March 2026 memo, acting ICE Director Todd Lyons argued that sending Abrego Garcia to Costa Rica would be "prejudicial to the United States." Washington had spent resources and political capital getting Liberia to accept other countries' nationals, he reasoned. By early September, Human Rights First and Refugees International had documented transfers under such arrangements to at least 31 countries. An exact nationwide total through November remains unavailable. Human Rights Watch, analyzing ICE records, counted 27,943 third-country deportations between January 20, 2025 and August 5, 2026, including 536 to Africa.

What Abrego Garcia escaped can be seen in the fate of Diadie Camara, who fled hereditary slavery in Mauritania. A US immigration judge had granted him protection from deportation there. Washington sent him instead to Equatorial Guinea, where deportees were held under armed guard in a hotel near Malabo's airport. Within weeks Camara was back in Mauritania, in hiding from the family that had enslaved him. By September, Equatorial Guinea had received about 65 third-country deportees from the US and sent at least two dozen on to their countries of origin. Many had obtained protective orders from American judges.

Since the Trump administration ended Temporary Protected Status for Haitian refugees, ICE has operated weekly deportation flights to Haiti, according to ICE Flight Monitor. On November 12 and again on November 19, the group tracked ICE Air flights from Alexandria, Louisiana, to Cap-Haïtien. A flight on September 3 carried 101 people to the port city on Haiti's northern coast. At the time, gang violence had displaced nearly 1.5 million people across Haiti, and the main international airport in Port-au-Prince was considered too dangerous for the flights.

This past week the WSWS reported on the seizure of Princeton neuroscientist Eva Yi Xie at Reagan National Airport and of Ricardo Larrondo Mendoza and his daughter Sofia Hernandez Mejia as they boarded a domestic flight at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. All three had federal work permits and pending asylum cases.

Video of masked agents dragging the father and daughter off the jet bridge prompted Seattle rock band Pearl Jam to condemn "the human toll of a system driven by cold cruelty." Pearl Jam wrote that voters had seen what ICE was doing to their neighbors and said "no more."

Ahead of Thanksgiving, singer Brandi Carlile asked listeners to consider what it meant to hear the family's cries while making plans to see their own relatives. She urged them to turn their "distress into action" and raise money for organizations assisting immigrants in detention.

That opposition found expression in the midterm elections. Yet the airport kidnappings took place after the votes were counted. Abrego Garcia escaped a deportation flight to Liberia and chose his own destination on Tuesday. He still had to leave his home in Maryland. The defense of the workers and families now in ICE's sights cannot wait two years on the slim hope that another administration will be more humane. It requires mobilizing the working class, immigrant and US-born alike, to stop the raids and deportations.

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