



'Deportation trap': Immigration agents arresting migrants at mandatory court check-ins

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A sweeping new investigation by the Associated Press is raising serious questions about what's happening inside America's immigration courts. White House Correspondent Liz Landers reports on how the administration has short-circuited the asylum process.

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Amna Nawaz:

A sweeping new investigation by the Associated Press is raising serious questions about what's happening inside America's immigration courts.

White House correspondent Liz Landers has more on how the administration has circumvented the asylum process.

Liz Landers:

Every day, all across the country, asylum cases are being tossed out, and asylum seekers exit the courtroom into the waiting arms and cuffs of immigration officers, that according to a new report from the Associated Press headlined "Migrants thought they were in a court for a routine hearing. Instead, it was a deportation trap."

One of its authors, Josh Goodman, joins us now.

Josh, thank you for

Josh Goodman, As

Thank you.

Liz Landers:

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In reporting this story, you and your colleagues went to 21 immigration courts. Can you describe the scene as you watch migrants walk into court and then walk out into a legal snare?

Josh Goodman:

Yes, we witnessed multiple arrests over several months. This was a routine practice by which government attorneys would go before a judge, dismiss a case, which would typically be a good outcome for someone trying to stay in the United States.

And as soon as they would leave the courtroom, they would be arrested by ICE agents or federal agents, frequently with masks. Nationwide, it's estimated that there were over 2,000 arrests in this manner. Some of the courts were quite chaotic, arresting people in hallways. People were being trapped in elevators. Journalists were being rough-handled, scenes of fathers being torn from their children, women begging federal agents to let their husbands go.

These are people who wanted to follow the rules. They didn't have a criminal record. They were making an asylum claim and going through all the stages that are required and were completely blindsided by what happened to them.

Liz Landers:

What has changed in these immigration courts under this new Trump administration?

Josh Goodman:

So these immigration courts were kind of structurally flawed from the very beginning. They are not part of the independent judiciary in the way that tax court or federal court or any multiple courts around the United States are.

They are part of the executive branch. They actually are part of the Justice Department. They had a degree of professionalism over time that was built up. And these judges were allowed to really rule like any other court. But they were always very vulnerable to some sort of takeover.

What we have seen now under the second Trump administration, they are effectively exploiting those vulnerabilities, issuing new orders about what judges can and cannot rule on. And they're really narrowing the scope that these judges have to decide the cases.

Liz Landers:

How do the attorney general's administration tactics...

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...w Trump

Josh Goodman:

What I found is that... wanted to protect... reasons or economic...

...cause they... t for nonlegal

And they did not sign up for this at all. One of the judges I talked to said, this is really like deciding death penalty cases in a traffic court environment, because they have so few tools to actually mete out justice that -- and they have such a huge docket -- that they are rushing through these cases without giving them the due consideration that they need.

And I noticed in some of the text messages between the federal agents and the attorneys a great deal of empathy and people kind of saying to themselves, this is cruel and we don't really want to be a part of this.

Liz Landers:

I was struck by that in your reporting, that these attorneys who are arguing in front of these judges are in direct contact, it seems, with the ICE agents who are waiting outside.

Josh Goodman:

This process starts about two weeks in advance. Every attorney is assigned a number of people, like maybe 40 cases that day. They have to come up with a list for the client -- the client here is ICE -- of people who they would -- quote, unquote -- call "amenable" to detention.

And then, on the day of the hearings, the attorney and the ICE officer in the hallway are coordinating almost in real time so that they can identify what the individual looks like, what kind of shirt, black shirt, a white shirt, whatever they're wearing, as well as if indeed the judge dismissed the case, because that was the hook.

If the judge didn't dismiss the case, they couldn't arrest these individuals. If they're trying to reach a quota every day, it's a lot easier to pick up people at court.

Liz Landers:

One of the stated reasons that the Trump administration has adopted this new policy is to work through the asylum system's yearslong backlog. Is it affecting the backlog and is it affecting other systems?

Josh Goodman:

That's a great question. The backlog is a huge challenge. It has been for many, many years. It keeps growing. The numbers themselves are not 100 percent

The government is still mind-boggling for only 6 words, there's not a lot of new pe

But every time that back into the system, and they c day is that the backlog is not grow

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Liz Landers:

So you find in this reporting that a number of these judges, these immigration court judges have been laid off. You guys profile in your story a judge in Ohio who had been fired.

Why are immigration judges getting fired right now if there is such a backlog to process these cases?

Josh Goodman:

Yes, I mean, this is a great conundrum. There's about 90 judges that have been fired since February. And the government, Trump administration, very clearly says that they are not targeting anyone from a viewpoint perspective.

But the data speaks for itself. These judges were more favorable to migrants than the national average.

Liz Landers:

Josh Goodman, thank you so much for joining us.

Josh Goodman:

Thank you for having me.

By — Liz Landers

Liz Landers is a correspondent for PBS News Hour, where she covers the White House and the Trump administration. Prior to joining the News Hour, she served as the national security correspondent for Scripps News, and also reported on disinformation for the network.

By — Kyle Midura

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