

April 11, 2025 12:00AM EDT | News Release

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US/El Salvador: Venezuelan Deportees Forcibly Disappeared

Disclose Fate of all Detainees; End Incommunicado Detention



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Since then, the Venezuelans have been held incommunicado. United States and Salvadoran authorities have not disclosed a list of the people removed, although CBS News published a [leaked list of names](#). Relatives of people apparently transferred to El Salvador told Human Rights Watch that US authorities said that they were unable to share any information on their relatives' whereabouts, while Salvadoran officials have been completely unresponsive.

“These enforced disappearances are a grave violation of international human rights law,” said [Juanita Goebertus](#), Americas director at Human Rights Watch. “The cruelty of the US and Salvadoran governments has put these people outside the protection of the law and caused immense pain to their families.”

US authorities should publicly identify the Venezuelans who were removed to El Salvador. The Salvadoran government should confirm their current whereabouts, disclose whether there is any legal basis for their detention, and allow them contact with the outside world.

Human Rights Watch has so far interviewed 40 relatives of people apparently removed to El Salvador. Human Rights Watch sent a letter to Salvadoran authorities on April 5, asking for information on the identity of people detained, their conditions of detention in CECOT, and the legal basis for their detentions. The government of El Salvador has not responded.

All family members interviewed said that US immigration authorities initially told their relatives, who were in immigration detention, that they would be sent back to Venezuela. None of the detainees were told that they would be sent to El Salvador, the relatives said.

The US authorities [announced](#) on March 17 that 238 Venezuelans had been removed and had arrived in El Salvador. The government of El Salvador [published](#) a video showing the faces of some of them, but neither government published a list of the people who were sent to and detained at CECOT, nor

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Venezuela or in other countries in Latin America where they lived in recent years.

[ICE maintains an Online Detainee Locator System](#) (ODLS), which lawyers and relatives use to find people held during immigration proceedings. Human Rights Watch cross-referenced the case numbers of some of the deportees and confirmed that they had been removed from the system. ICE [indicates](#) on its website, most recently updated on April 7, 2025, that “the ODLS only has information for detained aliens who are currently in ICE custody or who were released from ICE custody within the last 60 days.” This seems to indicate that the names of the Venezuelans Human Rights Watch interviewed were deleted sooner than is standard ICE practice.

Some relatives said that when they called US detention centers or ICE offices to ask about their relatives’ whereabouts, officials told them that they could not provide any information, that their family members no longer appeared in the locator system, or that their whereabouts were unknown. In a few cases, officials informed them that their relatives had been removed from the United States, but did not say where they had been sent.

On March 20, CBS News obtained and published an internal US government list of names, without identification numbers, of people sent to El Salvador. Neither Salvadoran nor US authorities have confirmed the authenticity of the list, although Human Rights Watch found all the names of the cases it has documented on the list.

Many of the relatives interviewed said they are unfamiliar with the legal system in El Salvador and do not know which authorities they should contact to obtain information about their relatives.

Some said they emailed the Salvadoran presidential high commissioner for human rights and freedom of expression, Andrés Guzman, but have received only an automatic acknowledgment of receipt or a response indicating that their request had been forwarded to the “relevant institutions.” A Salvadoran lawyer representing several of the detainees told Human Rights Watch he has not been allowed to meet

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rights obligations, Human Rights Watch said.

Under international law, an enforced disappearance occurs when authorities deprive a person of their liberty and then refuse to disclose that person’s fate or whereabouts. This violation is especially serious because it places people outside the protection of the law, making further abuses likely.

“Nobody should be forced to piece together bits of information from the media or to read into the authorities’ silence to find out where their relatives are being held,” Goebertus said. “Salvadoran authorities should urgently disclose the names and locations of all detainees transferred from the US, and allow them to contact their families.”

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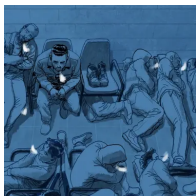
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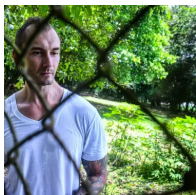
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