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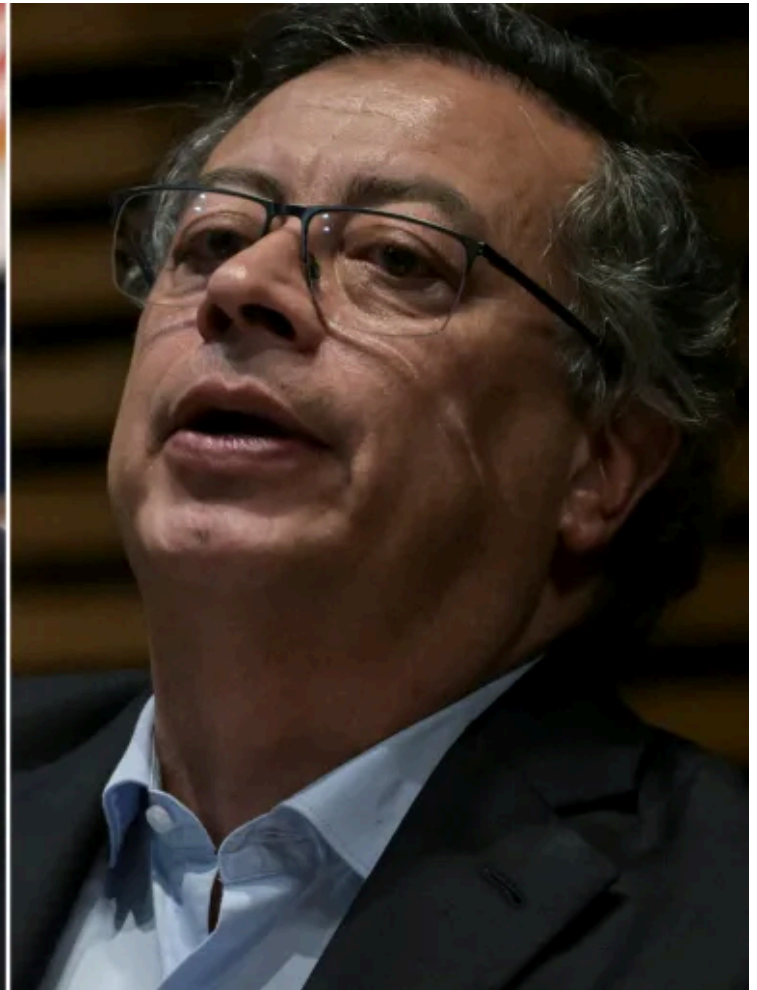
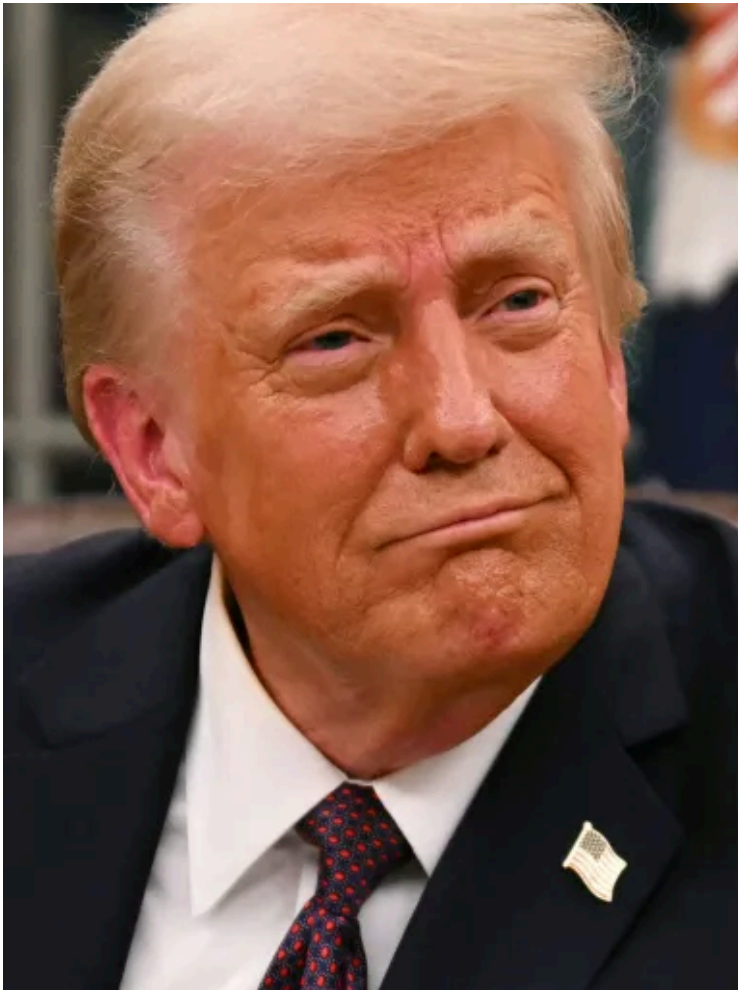
News | Migration

Colombia backs down on deportation flights after Trump's tariff threats

Colombia's Gustavo Petro had vowed to refuse deportation flights until migrants were guaranteed 'dignified treatment'.

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US President Donald Trump at the White House in Washington, DC, on January 20, 2025, and Colombian President Gustavo Petro in Mexico City on September 30, 2024 [Jim Watson and Yuri Cortez/ AFP]

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In a late-night news conference, Colombian Foreign Minister Luis Gilberto Murillo said officials had “overcome the impasse” and would accept citizens deported from the US.

A White House statement said Colombia had agreed to all of Trump's terms, including “unrestricted acceptance of all illegal aliens from Colombia returned from the United States, including on US military aircraft, without limitation or delay”.

“Today's events make clear to the world that America is respected again,” the White House said.

'You will never rule us'

Washington and Bogota had been poised for a damaging trade war after Trump announced he would hit Colombian imports with a 25 percent “emergency” tariff, rising to a 50 percent tariff from next week, in response to Petro's refusal to accept the deportation flights.

Trump also said he would impose a “travel ban and immediate visa revocations” and “visa sanctions” on government officials, as well as their family members and supporters, and enhance border inspections of all Colombian nationals and cargo.

“These measures are just the beginning. We will not allow the Colombian Government to violate its legal obligations with regard to the acceptance and return of the Criminals they forced into the United States!” Trump said on his social media network Truth Social.

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Trump later posted an image appearing to show himself wearing a pinstripe suit and a fedora while standing in front of a sign reading "FAFO", an acronym for "f*** around and find out".

Petro swiftly responded to Trump's announcement by promising to impose retaliatory tariffs of up to 50 percent.

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In a lengthy diatribe on X, Petro, a former member of the leftist M-19 armed rebel movement, said he did not like travelling to the US as it is "a bit boring", though he acknowledged his appreciation for Walt Whitman, Paul Simon and Noam Chomsky.

"My land is made up of goldsmiths who worked in the time of the Egyptian pharaohs and of the first artists in the world in Chiribiquete," Petro said.

"You will never rule us. The warrior who rode our lands, shouting freedom, who is called Bolivar, opposes us."

Petro had said earlier he had refused the deportation flights to send a message that the US "cannot treat Colombian migrants as criminals".

"I cannot allow migrants to remain in a country that does not want them; but if that country sends them back, it must be with dignity and respect for them and for our country," he said in a post on X, which included news footage showing deportees in Brazil at an airport with their hands and feet restrained.

Oliver Della Costa Stuenkel, an international relations professor at Fundacao Getulio Vargas in Sao Paulo, Brazil, said while Trump may get his way with Latin American countries in the short term, his aggressive tactics could push leaders in the region to seek out alternative partners to Washington.

"Leaders across Latin America will look at these moments and will, I think, be increasingly aware of the risk of being too dependent on the US," Stuenkel told Al Jazeera.

"They will seek to diversify their partnerships because for weaker countries, dealing with Washington is very challenging and the best way to increase your leverage when negotiating with Trump and expand your room for manoeuvre is to have alternatives to the US. It's to not be in situation where you are so dependent that you have nowhere to run."

Stuenkel said that Latin American leaders will have taken note of the vulnerability of Mexico and Canada, which Trump has threatened to hit with a 25 percent tariff over what he claims is their failure to stop the flow of drugs and undocumented migrants.

"So everybody looks at Mexico and Canada and says I want to avoid being Mexico and Canada because they can't really do anything when they are pressured by Trump," he said.

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“So I think in the medium- and long-term, countries will be very keen to strengthen ties to other powers around the world. I think that includes Europe, but mostly China... It also includes Russia. And I don't think that should be seen as an anti-American move. I think even pro-American leaders will actually do that.”

Earlier on Sunday, Trump's “border czar” expressed confidence that countries reluctant to take back their citizens would relent under US pressure.

“El Salvador didn't want to take MS-13 members back. Took President Trump 48 hours to make that happen,” Tom Homan told ABC News.

“President Trump's going to put America first, and if it doesn't, then we'll place 'em in a third safe country.”

Trump's actions drew condemnation from several Democratic legislators, with New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez warning that the tariffs would lead to higher prices for US consumers.

“Trump is all about making inflation WORSE for working class Americans, not better. He's lining the pockets of himself and the billionaire class,” Ocasio-Cortez said in a post on X.

'Populist prejudices'

In Colombia, Petro's handling of the spat also drew fire from critics.

Ivan Duque, who served as Colombia's president from 2018 to 2022 under the banner of the right-leaning Democratic Centre party, said his rival had committed an act of “tremendous irresponsibility” by challenging US sovereignty without attempting dialogue.

“It is urgent that the Petro government put the country above its populist prejudices and anti-US rhetoric and quickly establish protocols for receiving deported Colombians, and avoid a situation that could structurally affect our economy and our citizens,” Duque said in a post on X.

Colombia, which counts the US as its biggest trade partner, is one of a minority of nations with a trade deficit with the US.

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Shackled undocumented migrants prepare to board a C-17 Globemaster III for a deportation flight at Fort Bliss, Texas, the United States, on January 23, 2025 [US Army Sgt 1st Class Nicholas J. De La Pena/US Department of Defense via AFP]

Trump's immigration crackdown has elevated tensions with governments across Latin America, the source of the lion's share of the estimated 11-14 million undocumented migrants in the US.

Brazil on Saturday accused the Trump administration of subjecting migrants to "degrading treatment" after deportees were reportedly handcuffed during a commercial flight to return unauthorised migrants to the Latin American country.

As part of a burst of activity to follow through on Trump's campaign pledge to crack down on undocumented migration, his administration has begun using military aircraft to support deportation flights arranged by the US Department of Homeland Security.

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On Friday, two Air Force C-17 cargo planes carrying about 160 deportees touched down in Guatemala, making it one of the first countries known to accept the flights.

NBC News on Friday reported that Mexico had denied permission to a military plane carrying deportees.

The report, which quoted three unnamed sources, said it was unclear why Mexico had refused the flight.

Following the publication of the report, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a post on X that Mexico had accepted "a record" of four deportation flights in a single day.

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