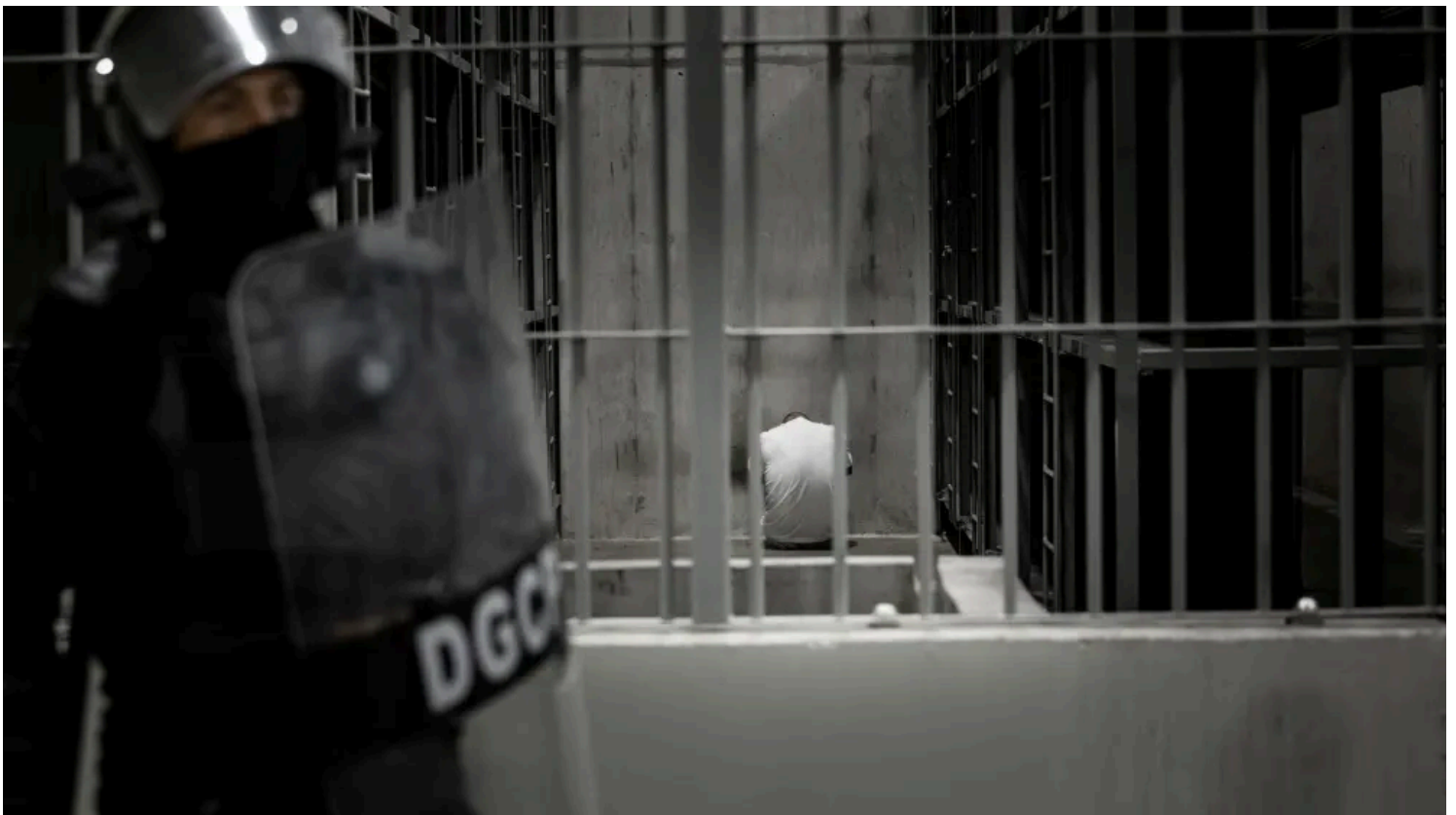


November 12, 2025

“You Have Arrived in Hell”

Torture and Other Abuses Against Venezuelans in El Salvador’s Mega Prison

Available In [English](#) [Español](#)



A Venezuelan migrant allegedly linked to criminal organizations sits inside a cell at CECOT on March 16, 2025, in

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Summary

The nightmare began the moment they took me off the plane.

—Gonzalo Y., a 26-year-old from Zulia State, Venezuela, July 31, 2025

The United States removed Gonzalo and 251 other Venezuelans to El Salvador in March and April 2025. When the plane landed, officers forced him and others to kneel with their heads down, he said. He told one of them that he had a spine problem and could not keep his head low, but one officer struck him with a baton in the back of the neck. On a bus to the maximum-security prison known as the Center for Terrorism Confinement (Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo, CECOT), guards beat him again, he said.

"When we arrived at the entrance of CECOT, guards made us kneel so they could shave our heads," Gonzalo said. "One of the officers hit me on the legs with a baton, and I fell to the ground on my knees."

Everyone, he said, was subjected to the same treatment. "The prison director told us, 'You have arrived in hell'. In CECOT, guards and riot police beat and abused the Venezuelans constantly. "The guards beat me many times, in the hallways of the prison module and in the punishment cell," Gonzalo said. "They beat us almost every day."

The Venezuelans were held incommunicado in the CECOT maximum-security prison for approximately four months, until July 18, when they were sent to Venezuela as part of a

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The governments of the United States and El Salvador accused most of these people of being “terrorists,” part of Tren de Aragua, a Venezuelan organized crime group that the United States has designated as a foreign terrorist organization. However, Human Rights Watch and Cristosal’s review of criminal record background documents indicates that many of them had not been convicted of any crimes by federal or state authorities in the United States, nor in Venezuela or other Latin America countries where they had lived.

Human Rights Watch and Cristosal found that the 252 Venezuelans were subjected to what amounts to arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance under international human rights law.

Gonzalo’s mother said her son called her on March 13, from immigration detention in the United States, to tell her he was going to be deported to Venezuela, where he would “give her the birthday hug he owed her.”

“I held on to that promise—but he did not arrive,” his mother said. As the days passed without information, she felt “unbearable pain.” The family called multiple detention centers, but US authorities denied information on his whereabouts. They only said he had been removed from the United States.

About a week later, a friend told Gonzalo’s mother that he had found Gonzalo’s name on a list published by a media outlet, naming the Venezuelans who had been sent to CECOT. She searched videos and photos of the deported men, hoping to recognize him, but she didn’t find him. “From that moment, everything went dark,” she said, “All I felt was anguish, pain, anger, and despair.”

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People held in CECOT said they were beaten from the moment they arrived in El Salvador and throughout their time in detention. Guards and riot police beat them in the hallways of the prison module and in a solitary confinement cell in a section of CECOT known as "the Island." They beat them during daily cell searches for allegedly violating prison rules, such as speaking loudly with other detainees or showering at the wrong time, and sometimes for requesting medical treatment.

People held in CECOT said that many detainees were also beaten after US Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem's visit in March, following visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in May and June, and after two prison protests occurring in April and May.

Human Rights Watch and Cristosal concluded that the cases of torture and ill-treatment of Venezuelans in CECOT were not isolated incidents by rogue guards or riot police, but rather systematic violations that took place repeatedly during their detention. Every former detainee interviewed reported being subjected to serious physical and psychological abuse on a near-daily basis, throughout their entire time in detention.

These beatings and other abuses appear to be part of a practice designed to subjugate, humiliate, and discipline detainees through the imposition of grave physical and psychological suffering. Officers also appear to have acted on the belief that their superiors either supported or tolerated their abusive acts.

Daniel B., for instance, described how officers beat him after he spoke with ICRC staff members during their visit to CECOT in May. He said guards took him to "the Island," where they beat him with a baton. He said a blow made his nose bleed. "They kept hitting me, in the stomach, and when I tried to breathe, I started to choke on the blood. My cellmates shouted

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disappearance, and torture and other ill-treatment. US officials repeatedly denied relatives of people sent to CECOT information on their whereabouts, making the US government complicit in their enforced disappearances. The US government also violated its legal obligations to respect the principle of non-refoulement by transferring Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador despite easily foreseeable risks of torture and ill-treatment.

Many people who were held in CECOT said they continue to suffer lasting physical injuries and psychological trauma. "I'm on alert all the time because every time I heard the sound of keys and handcuffs, it meant they were coming to beat us," one of them said.

The Venezuelans who were detained in CECOT have since been returned to their home country. Venezuela suffers a humanitarian crisis and systematic human rights violations carried out by the administration of Nicolás Maduro, which have compelled nearly 8 million people to flee. Some of the people held in CECOT had fled abuses by the Maduro government and its security forces and face the risk of persecution in Venezuela. Their repatriation to Venezuela violates the principle of non-refoulement. Additionally, in some cases, members of the Venezuelan intelligence services have appeared at the homes of people who were held in CECOT and forced them to record videos regarding their treatment in the United States.

Human Rights Watch and Cristosal call on the US government to end all transfer of third-country nationals to El Salvador. We also urge foreign governments and international human rights bodies, including the United Nations Human Rights Council, to substantially step up their public scrutiny of the US government's human rights violations against migrants as well as El Salvador's widespread human rights violations against detainees.

"We are not terrorists, we were migrants," one of the people held in CECOT said. "We went

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November 12, 2025 |

News Release

US/El Salvador: Torture of Venezuelan Deportees

Stop Sending People to Face
Danger; Ensure
Accountability

Recommendations

To the US Government:

- End any transfer or removal of third-country nationals and other people at risk of abuse to El Salvador, given prior reports of torture and ill-treatment in Salvadoran prisons and the evidence included in this report.
- Stop the expulsion or involuntary transfer of noncitizens to third countries to which they have no genuine ties.

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- Ensure that Venezuelan migrants who were deported to El Salvador under the Alien Enemies Act, and who are now in Venezuela, have a genuine opportunity to return to the United States, to continue with their asylum claims, should they wish to do so.
- Refrain from removing people to countries where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they would be subject to torture and other serious abuses, as required under the principle of non-refoulement established among others in the United Nations Convention against Torture.
- Respect the right under US law of any person who is physically present in the United States or who arrives in the United States, whether or not at a designated port of arrival, irrespective of the person's status, to apply for asylum.
- Take measures to ensure protection for Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers. These include:
 - Respecting the legal status of people who arrived in the United States under humanitarian parole.
 - Respecting and extending the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation for Venezuelans, recognizing the ongoing conditions and risks that prevent many Venezuelans from returning to their country in safety.
- Ensure that any financial, technical, or security assistance to El Salvador's prison system, including CECOT, is conditioned on demonstrable improvements in detention conditions, treatment of detainees, and accountability for abuses, consistent with international human rights law.

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- Provide all detainees in CECOT and other detention facilities in the country with adequate food, safe drinking water, bedding, hygiene products, and access to natural light and ventilation, to prevent inhuman or degrading treatment.
- Restrict the transfer of all detainees in CECOT and other detention facilities to solitary confinement to the maximum extent possible, ensuring its use remains exceptional, proportionate, and subject to strict oversight and judicial review.
- Strictly limit the duration of confinement in solitary confinement, particularly for detainees with pre-existing health conditions.
- Ensure timely and adequate access to health care for all detainees in the country's penitentiary system, including mental health services and uninterrupted provision of prescribed medications, consistent with international health standards.
- End the incommunicado detention regime of all detainees in El Salvador.
- Ensure that all detainees can exercise their right to legal counsel by facilitating confidential meetings with lawyers, providing adequate access to telephones, and guaranteeing timely information about their legal rights and ongoing proceedings during processing.
- Allow regular and unannounced access by independent oversight bodies—including the International Committee of the Red Cross, and relevant United Nations and Inter-American mechanisms—to all detention areas, including punishment cells. Ensure they can select interviewees and conduct confidential interviews.
- Guarantee strict non-retaliation protections for detainees who speak with humanitarian and human rights monitors, ensuring that all allegations of reprisals are

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and prosecutions that respect due process and other fundamental rights; and 2) identifies cases of people who have been detained without adequate credible evidence, and whom authorities should promptly release. The mechanism should prioritize reviewing cases of children, people with disabilities, pregnant women, and people with serious health conditions.

To the Venezuelan Government:

- Respect the rights of Venezuelan nationals returned from El Salvador, including by:
 - Ensuring they are not subjected to reprisals or stigmatization for having left Venezuela.
 - Immediately ending any surveillance and harassment by state authorities, including the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN), against returnees and their families.
 - Providing access to medical and psychosocial care, legal assistance, and the reissuance of identity documents.

To Other Governments, including Members of the Organization of American States (OAS) and European Countries:

- Publicly and privately condemn human rights violations committed by the United States against migrants transferred to CECOT and urge the United States to end the transfer of third-country nationals to countries where they have no meaningful

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non-recurrence of the human rights violations documented in this report.

To the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees:

- Investigate allegations of ill-treatment, torture and other abuses in CECOT, as well as in other prisons in El Salvador, and report on them publicly, including to the UN Human Rights Council.

To the UN Committee Against Torture:

- Investigate allegations of torture in CECOT and other prisons, and consider invoking the procedure established in article 20 of the Convention against Torture for countries where torture is "systematically practised."

To the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights:

- Publicly and privately condemn human rights violations committed by Salvadoran security forces at CECOT.
- In the commission's next annual report, consider including El Salvador in Chapter IV.B, which highlights country situations where there is a "systematic infringement of the independence of the judiciary," where the "free exercise of the rights guaranteed in the American Declaration or the American Convention has been unlawfully suspended," or where the "State has committed or is committing massive, serious and

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who provided credible information about the people sent to CECOT. These people were located in Venezuela, Colombia, and the United States.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 40 people who were held in CECOT following their release from prison on July 18.

Based on information provided by interviewees, Human Rights Watch and Cristosal documented 130 cases of Venezuelan migrants whom the Trump administration transferred to the CECOT prison. One hundred and twenty-five of them were sent to CECOT on March 15; four on March 30; and one on April 12. Cristosal provided legal assistance to the relatives of 76 Venezuelans held in CECOT, helping them file habeas corpus petitions before El Salvador's Supreme Court.

Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Researchers explained the purpose and voluntary nature of the interviews and how Human Rights Watch and Cristosal would use the information. All participants gave informed consent and understood they would not receive any form of compensation. Interviewees were informed they could end the interview at any time.

To protect interviewees from possible reprisals and given that several former detainees are pursuing legal action against the governments of the United States and El Salvador, Human Rights Watch and Cristosal have withheld their names and used pseudonyms. The report does not disclose identifying information unless explicit consent was provided and even then, only when doing so does not pose a risk to the individual. We have used pseudonyms even in some cases where interviewees had previously spoken to journalists and agreed to be publicly identified by their full names.

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that ICE released in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request made by the UCLA Center for Immigration Law and Policy. Analysis in this report is based on the late July release made public by the Deportation Data Project. The data is supposed to include every deportation made by ICE. Crime data is the most serious charge that ICE has in its databases and is standardized according to National Crime Information Center (NCIC) codes. Analysis also uses arrests and detentions data released under the same FOIA request and linked to the deportation data by an anonymous identification variable.

Researchers also reviewed criminal background certificates from Venezuela, the United States, and other countries where the detainees had previously lived, including Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. We reviewed US state and federal court records.

We also reviewed sworn statements from some former detainees about the risks that led them to flee Venezuela, as well as statements from relatives, employers and others putting into question the US government's claim that the detainees had any connection with Tren de Aragua.

In addition, Human Rights Watch and Cristosal consulted the ICE Online Detainee Locator System (ODLS) to review the status of several deportees and confirmed they had been removed from the system after their transfer to El Salvador. Researchers also examined records in the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) online database to corroborate information about immigration proceedings for most of the detainees.

Open-source research support was provided by students of the Investigations Lab of the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

Human Rights Watch and Cristosal further analyzed photographs shared by some former

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opportunity to comment on the research. At time of writing, Human Rights Watch had not received a response.

I. Background

On March 15, 2025, the US government removed 238 Venezuelan migrants from the United States to El Salvador, where they were immediately taken to the maximum-security facility known as the Center for Terrorism Confinement (Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo, CECOT).

On March 17, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt announced that 101 of the Venezuelan migrants had been removed under Title 8 pursuant to regular immigration procedures, while 137 had been deported under the Alien Enemies Act.^[1] This followed an executive order signed by President Donald Trump on March 14, declaring that Tren de Aragua, a Venezuelan criminal group, constituted part of a "hybrid criminal state perpetrating an invasion of and predatory incursion into the United States."^[2]

In the 137 deportations carried out under the Alien Enemies Act, the administration claimed the Venezuelan migrants were members of Tren de Aragua and therefore a national security threat.^[3] The Alien Enemies Act is incompatible with international human rights law and, as

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An expert on Tren de Aragua said in a sworn declaration that tattoos and hand gestures are not "reliable" or "credible" methods for identifying members of the group.^[6] The expert emphasized that the government's reliance on tattoos reflects "an incorrect conflation of gang practices in Central America and Venezuela," and noted that Tren de Aragua does not have a distinctive style of dress.^[7]

In the 101 cases where Venezuelans were removed to El Salvador pursuant to regular immigration procedures codified in Title 8 of the US Code, the administration provided no details about the circumstances of those removals.^[8] Under Title 8, US authorities may remove individuals who enter the country without authorization, overstay or violate the terms of a visa, or are deemed inadmissible on criminal, security, or fraud-related grounds. People admitted legally may also be deported if they commit certain crimes or otherwise violate immigration laws.^[9]

In most cases, removal under Title 8 involves detaining the person, issuing a Notice to Appear before an immigration judge, and holding a hearing in which the person can apply for asylum or other forms of protection. In some cases, however, expedited removal allows officials to deport people at the border without a hearing unless they express a fear of return, in which case they undergo a "credible fear interview."

On March 30, US authorities carried out another flight, sending, among others, seven Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador, individuals they alleged were violent criminals tied to Tren de Aragua.^[10] On April 12, another ten people, including at least one from Venezuela, were removed to El Salvador.^[11]

The US - El Salvador Agreement

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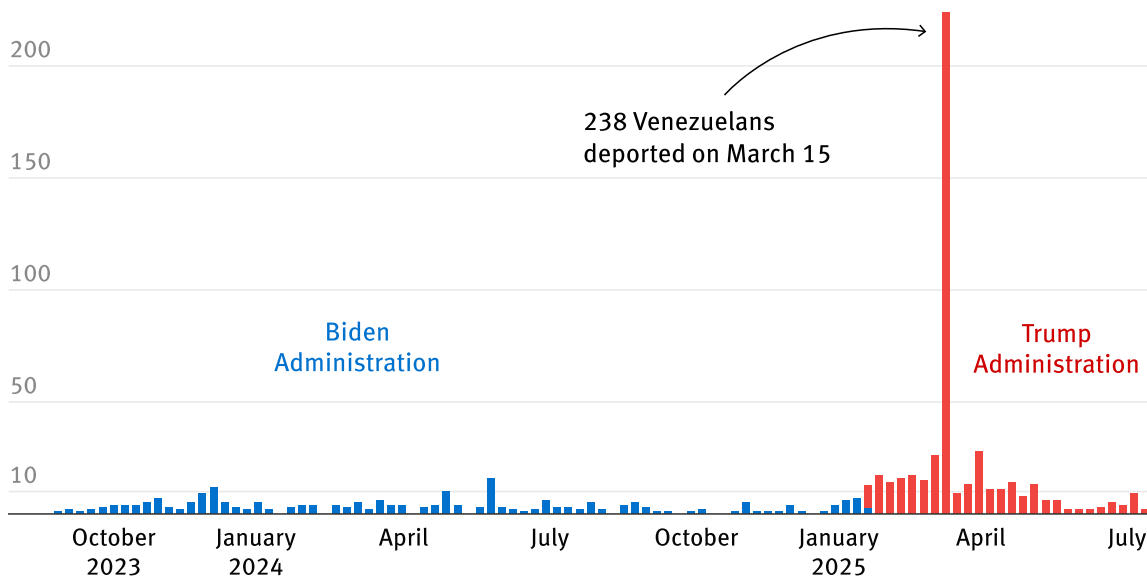


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that El Salvador expressed its willingness to “accept and house approximately 300 members of TdA removed for up to one year or until another decision is made.”^[13] In a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing in May, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that El Salvador had done the US “a big favor” and its government could “ha[d] a right to spend that money on any way they wish.”^[14]

The agreement resulted in a significant increase in the number of third-country nationals sent to El Salvador.

Weekly Deportations of Third-country Nationals to El Salvador



Source: Government data provided by ICE in response to a FOIA request, posted by the Deportation Data Project and analyzed by Human Rights Watch.

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conviction (in some cases, for minor crimes), another 30 percent had pending criminal charges and 5, or 18 percent, had no criminal history. Their relatives told the press in October that, since their removal from the United States, they have been unable to communicate with them, or confirm their whereabouts.^[17] On October 2, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued "precautionary measures" regarding the case of a Salvadoran national who appeared to have been removed to El Salvador on March 15 and whose whereabouts remained unknown. The Commission called on the Salvadoran state to take "immediate measures" to find him and report his whereabouts to his relatives.^[18]

Among the Salvadorans removed on March 15 was César Humberto López Larios ("El Greñas"), top leader of the MS-13 gang, who had been arrested in 2024 and was awaiting trial in US federal court on terrorism-related charges.^[19] A federal judge granted a request from prosecutors to dismiss the indictment against López Larios on March 11, enabling the US government to remove him to El Salvador.^[20]

El Salvador's ambassador in Washington, Milena Mayorga, acknowledged in an interview that President Bukele had asked US officials to return MS-13 leaders to El Salvador.^[21] Internal correspondence cited in media reports indicates that Salvadoran officials discussed a "50 percent discount" on the fees for housing migrants in exchange for the transfer of nine high-ranking MS-13 members.^[22] Federal prosecutors also asked the judge to dismiss an indictment against Vladimir Arévalo-Chávez, another high-ranking MS-13 leader, to enable his removal to El Salvador.^[23]

The removal of López Larios may be part of an effort to ensure that MS-13 leaders do not testify in US courts about their alleged negotiations with the Bukele administration. According to indictments in US federal courts, MS-13's top leadership in El Salvador negotiated with the Bukele government looser prison regimes, shorter sentences, early

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custody in suspicious circumstances.^[27]

The CECOT Maximum-Security Prison

The Center for Terrorism Confinement (Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo, CECOT), a maximum-security prison in Tecoluca, San Vicente Department, was inaugurated on January 31, 2023, by President Bukele.^[28]

According to the minister of justice and public security, the massive prison complex was built to hold "terrorist gang members captured by law enforcement." It reportedly spans more than 236 acres and is completely isolated from any urban area.^[29] It includes several facilities: housing modules, kennels for guard dogs, staff buildings, an armory, and a security equipment warehouse.^[30]

CECOT is reportedly guarded by 600 members of the armed forces and 250 officers of the National Civil Police, who, according to the government, provide "24/7 security to address any possible disturbance."^[31] According to a 2023 *BBC* report, CECOT's security staff also includes about 1,000 prison guards.^[32]

According to open source research conducted by the University of California, Berkeley's Investigation Lab, CECOT has eight modules with 32 cells each, totaling 256 cells.^[33] Each module has at least six "punishment cells," at least one medical room, and three rooms for virtual hearings.^[34] Each cell contains four-level bunk beds with five cots per level, housing up to 80 prisoners per cell, which amounts to a total capacity of over 20,400 people.^[35] Yet President Bukele has said that the prison can hold up to 40,000 detainees.^[36] The *Financial Times* has estimated that if it held that number of detainees, each person would have 0.6

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always on.^[39]

The prison holds "punishment cells" of 2.5 by 4 meters that contain a cement slab, a water tub with a bucket, basic drainage, and a toilet.^[40] They are used to hold detainees in solitary confinement. Visits are not allowed.^[41]

Prisoners in a "trust regime," who under Salvadoran law are granted greater flexibility inside and are allowed to perform work, are tasked with distributing food to other detainees.^[42] Meals are served in plastic containers and cups and passed through the cell bars. Detainees receive three identical meals a day.^[43]

According to journalists who have visited CECOT, detainees eat with their hands, are allowed out into the central corridor of the modules for 30 minutes per day, and have their heads shaved every five days.^[44]

The Venezuelans interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported that they were held in CECOT's Module 8, which according to their testimonies consists of 32 cells arranged in two facing rows of 16, separated by a wide central corridor. They said that in the middle of the rows, there are at least six small punishment cells—known as "the Island"—each built for a single person, while directly opposite them is a room used as an infirmary. Several former detainees said that at the far end of the module, near the ceiling, there was a single window that provided the only source of natural light and air.

The University of California, Berkeley's Investigation Lab found the former detainees' descriptions to be consistent with publicly available videos and images of CECOT modules.^[45]

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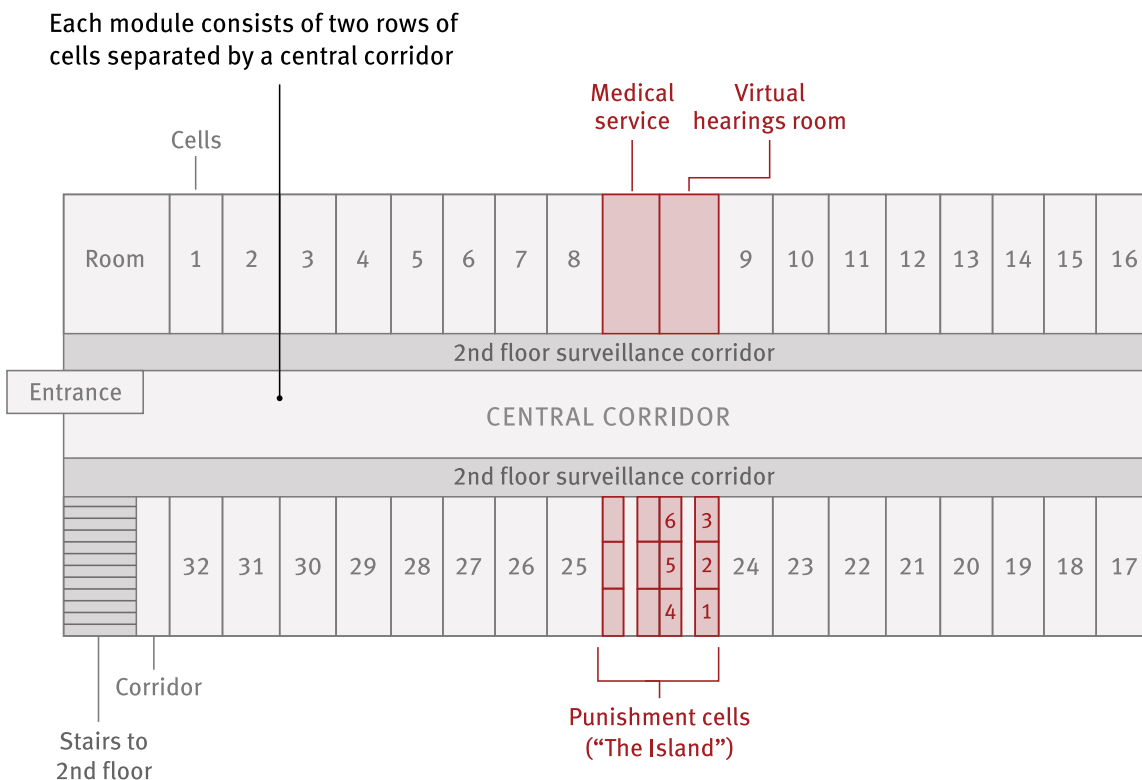


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Map of Module 8, based on interviews with detainees



Source: Approximate reconstruction of Module 8 of the CECOT, based on interviews with migrants and corroborated by open-source research conducted by the University of California, Berkeley’s Investigations Lab.

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Former detainees said each cell contained four large multi-level metal bunk structures placed in rows, without mattresses, pillows or bedding. There were two toilets in each corner and two sinks positioned near the entrance, just beyond the bars separating the cell from the corridor, along with two water tanks.^[46] This description is consistent with photographs and videos of CECOT published on social media by the Salvadoran government and journalists,

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"less lethal" kinetic impact projectiles or lethal ammunition. The weapons are generally carried by guards on the second-level walkways. Riot control units are also deployed inside the modules wearing riot gear with shields, helmets, and protective masks. Members of the military appear stationed at external checkpoints and perimeter zones and are armed with military-pattern rifles.^[49]

Several former detainees told Human Rights Watch that guards, both men and women, identified themselves by nicknames and kept their faces covered.^[50] The nicknames included: Satán, Pantera, Felino, El Tigre, El Cuervo, Flecha, Vegeta, and Caín.

"The officers who guarded us in the module wore gray shirts and black pants. They always carried a baton, wore hoods, and had no identification," said Marco P., a 25-year-old construction worker from Caracas.^[51] "Few of them were without hoods."^[52]

"Among the guards, there was one called 'Satan,' who was the most abusive," said Julián G. to Human Rights Watch.^[53] "There was another known as 'the Tiger,' who was the boss of them all. And another, called 'Vegeta,' was the only guard who used a phone; he was the one who took photos and videos of us."^[54]

People held in CECOT said riot police regularly entered the module to support guards during searches and to help secure the cell block.^[55]

Prior Reports of Torture and Abuse in El Salvador's Prisons

The United States sent the 252 Venezuelans to CECOT despite credible prior reports that torture and other abuses were taking place in El Salvador's prisons. This violates the

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Additionally, a wide range of international human rights monitors have for years reported on the severe human rights abuses to which authorities subject detainees in El Salvador's prisons, including torture, ill-treatment, lack of access to sufficient food, water and medicine, overcrowding, prolonged incommunicado detention, and failure to ensure protection from violence.^[59]

Since the Legislative Assembly passed a state of emergency in 2022, which remains in place, Cristosal has found "systematic" abuses in El Salvador's prisons, including the deliberate denial of food and drinking water, as well as physical and psychological torture.^[60] Cristosal has reported that these abusive conditions have led to the deaths of at least 419 detainees since 2022.^[61]

Until 2021, El Salvador's prisons held just over 39,000 people.^[62] Since the state of emergency, the prison population has surged to more than 109,000, making El Salvador reportedly the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world.^[63] The government's mass detentions have caused severe overcrowding and worsened prison conditions, including lack of access to drinking water and the spread of serious illnesses such as tuberculosis and skin infections.^[64]

Cristosal has also documented that prison authorities have denied people in prison access to medication and timely medical care for serious or chronic illnesses, including those they had before entering prison and those acquired while in custody.^[65] In some cases, prison staff refused to accept medication provided by family members. Authorities have also failed to provide medical care to detainees who were beaten while in custody.^[66]

In addition to poor physical conditions, prison staff have committed repeated human rights

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rights and religious organizations. Authorities appear to use these tactics to prevent detainees from reporting the abuses and conditions they face.^[69]

Cristosal has also previously documented the use of "punishment cells." These are small rooms with no beds or regular access to sanitary facilities. Inmates held there are isolated for long periods of time, with limited access to water and food.^[70]

CECOT, in particular, appears to have been built to violate the dignity and rights of the people held there, in violation of international human rights law and in contravention of standards like the Mandela Rules that articulate a rights-respecting vision of incarceration.

Statements by government officials indicate that the government intends to use CECOT as a place of permanent confinement. In February 2023, Justice and Public Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro said that those sent to CECOT would never leave alive. "As the Security Cabinet, we will make sure that the sentences are high enough so that none of those who enter CECOT ever walk out; they will only be able to leave in a coffin," he stated.^[71] That same month, Osiris Luna Meza, the head of the prison system said "All terrorists entering CECOT will never come out, and those sent to punishment cells will not see the light of day."^[72]

Detainees held in CECOT and other prisons in El Salvador have little to no access to justice. The Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court has yet to rule on more than 100 habeas corpus petitions filed by Cristosal on behalf of detainees; in some instances, the cases were filed more than three years ago. Despite multiple reports of torture and ill-treatment, Human Rights Watch and Cristosal are not aware of any charges against prison staff or members of security forces for abuses occurring in El Salvador's prisons.

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manner that is consistent with El Salvador's international legal obligations regarding human rights and treatment of prisoners, including the Convention Against Torture.^[74]

However, in the context of El Salvador, where torture is a serious and persistent problem, diplomatic assurances are not an adequate tool to prevent torture, and do not satisfy states' obligations under the principle of non-refoulement.^[75]

II. The Victims

On the basis of interviews with people held in CECOT, their relatives and lawyers, Human Rights Watch documented the different reasons that 130 of those held in CECOT originally left Venezuela, investigated whether they had criminal records in the United States, and researched their legal status in the US at the time of their transfer to El Salvador.

Reasons for Fleeing Venezuela

Venezuela faces three simultaneous crises: a crackdown on dissent, a humanitarian emergency, and a massive exodus of Venezuelans. Authorities persecute and criminally prosecute opponents, journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations.

With the knowledge of high-ranking officials, security forces, and other government actors

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2014, over 18,000 people have been subjected to politically motivated arrests, with over 800 political prisoners remaining behind bars as of September 2025, according to the pro-bono group Foro Penal.^[79] Many have been subjected to enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention.^[80]

The people held in CECOT and their relatives described the circumstances that forced them to flee Venezuela, often undertaking dangerous journeys across the Darién Gap and through dangerous areas of Mexico controlled by criminal groups.^[81]

In at least 19 cases, people held in CECOT or their relatives said they fled Venezuela to escape threats, abuses, or persecution by state security forces, as well as threats posed by armed and criminal groups, including Tren de Aragua. Their allegations indicate that these individuals fled persecution and, in many instances, articulated strong claims for asylum.

- **Pedro P.**, a 26-year-old man from Miranda State, Venezuela, said he joined peaceful protests against the government in 2018.^[82] "We demanded an end to repression and called for lower prices on basic food products," he said. Pedro said that the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana, GNB) violently repressed the protest, firing rubber pellets and tear gas.

He said that a few days later the GNB summoned him for interrogation. A lieutenant threatened him with five years in prison if he joined other protests. About 15 days later, men carrying weapons, dressed in civilian clothes with their faces covered, entered the home of another protester he knew, he said. "They tortured him for hours with beatings and insults until he died," he said. "We belonged to the same protest group, and all of us were threatened that we could suffer the same fate."

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accused him of receiving opposition funds and threatened to arrest him.^[84] "I saw what was happening to other people who were accused of links to the opposition—they were threatened and persecuted. I didn't want to go through the same thing, so I fled," he said. He applied and was admitted to migrate to the United States through the Safe Mobility program in March 2024.^[85]

Many others said they fled Venezuela due to the humanitarian crisis in the country, which impacted their capacity to obtain basic food or medicine.

- **Rodrigo A.**, a 34-year-old man from Lara State, fled Venezuela in 2017 because he was unable to buy sufficient food, his mother said.^[86] "There was so much scarcity here—we had no flour, rice, milk, or oil. In other words, there was no food," she said. "My son had nothing to feed my grandchildren. They didn't even have clothes; everything they wore was donated by neighbors or relatives." She said her grandchildren eventually became ill from malnutrition. "They were very weak. At the hospital they told us to buy nutritional supplements, but we had no money, and the doctors didn't have any to give us."

She also became seriously ill. "I was diagnosed with cancer, and we had no money to buy my medicine, much less to pay for treatment," she said. "All of this pushed my son to leave. He wanted to help us get out of poverty and, above all, to save his children from hunger and me from cancer."

- **Flavio T.**, a 25-year-old man from Lara State, said that he fled Venezuela in 2017 because of the country's economic collapse.^[87] He worked as a driver but could not earn enough to buy food for himself and his family. He first traveled to Peru, where he continued working as a driver, but said he experienced severe xenophobia—people

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appointment through the CBP One mobile application and presented himself at the US border in August 2024.

- **Sebastián Q.**, a 24-year-old man from Caracas, fled Venezuela in 2020 to send remittances to his family. "I thought from outside I could give my mother and children a better life," he said.^[88] Although he had multiple jobs in Venezuela, Sebastián said he could not earn enough in rural Bolívar State to feed his family.

He first moved to Peru, where he worked in fishing and construction. But he said he faced xenophobia, and even an instance of physical assault. "Just because you're Venezuelan, they think you're a criminal," he said. He continued north toward the United States through the Darién Gap. In Mexico, he applied for a CBP One appointment and worked in construction, but after two months without a response, he decided to cross into the United States in July 2023. "Mexican migration agents shot at us when we ran before crossing the river. You had two options: cross or go back. If you crossed, they locked you up."

Criminal Records

The Trump administration claimed that the majority of Venezuelans sent to CECOT were members of the Venezuelan organized crime group Tren de Aragua. Human Rights Watch and Cristosal found that in many of the documented cases, individuals had no criminal records in the United States, Venezuela, or other countries in Latin America.

Human Rights Watch analyzed data on US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) that ICE released in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request made by the UCLA Center for Immigration Law and Policy.

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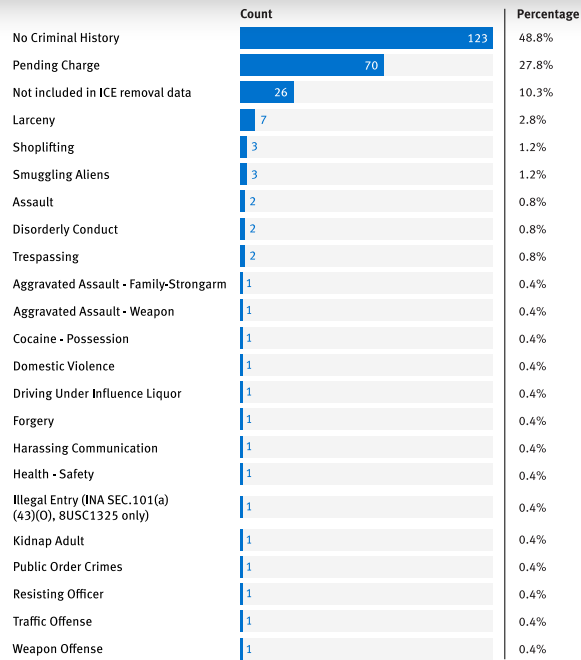


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convictions, whereas 20 percent of the Venezuelans who remained in ICE detention, or were deported or released elsewhere, had prior convictions. Similarly, only 3.2 percent of the Venezuelans sent to CECOT had a violent or potentially violent conviction but 4.3 percent of the detained Venezuelans who were not had such a conviction. And a higher percentage of those sent to CECOT had no criminal history whatsoever (49 percent versus 43 percent).^[92]



Source: Government data provided by ICE in response to a FOIA request, posted by the Deportation Data Project and analyzed by Human Rights Watch.



Human Rights Watch reviewed documents in 58 of the 130

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Lower Rates of Violent Convictions Among Venezuelans Sent to CECOT

Charge category	Percentage of detained Venezuelans sent to CECOT	Percentage of detained Venezuelans not sent to CECOT
No criminal history	48.8%	43.2%
Pending charge	27.8%	38.4%
Not included in ICE removal data	10.3%	0.0%
Theft offense	4.4%	3.9%
Violent/potentially violent offense	3.2%	4.3%
Other offense	3.2%	2.9%
Property offense	0.8%	0.7%
Immigration offense (Illegal entry/re-entry)	0.4%	2.4%
Traffic offense	0.4%	1.5%
DUI	0.4%	1.3%
Drug possession	0.4%	0.8%
Drug sales/trafficking	0.0%	0.9%
Sex offense	0.0%	0.7%

documented cases of people held in CECOT, and all indicated that they did not have criminal records in Venezuela or other countries in Latin America.^[93] Cristosal reached a similar conclusion on the basis of their review of criminal records and interviews with relatives of 76 people held in CECOT.^[94]

Migration Situation

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which gave them the right to a full hearing on their asylum claims before an immigration judge, but their cases were all pending at the time of their removal to El Salvador.

- Four said that they were informed of their deportation orders while in detention, without being given the opportunity to challenge their removals.
- Sixteen sought asylum during deportation proceedings as a defense against removal and claimed they were denied a full process.
- Eighteen said they "voluntarily" agreed to depart due to a combination of poor conditions in migration detention centers and indications by ICE officials that they had no right to seek asylum.
- Three said they had arrived in the United States after completing a full vetting process and being processed through the Safe Mobility Offices program established by the US government and run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). They said they had been conditionally recognized as refugees, but were detained at the airport apparently because CBP officers linked their tattoos to the Venezuelan organized crime group Tren de Aragua.

Additionally, ICE data indicates that 33 of the people ICE sent to CECOT had been previously held in ICE detention and released, including two people who had been detained and released twice prior to their deportation. Venezuelans who were sent to CECOT were previously released from ICE detention by being paroled, receiving humanitarian parole, released on their own recognizance or released on supervision.^[95] The majority (19 out of 33) of the people that ICE had previously released had no criminal history and only 9 had a previous criminal conviction.^[96]

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to the crime of enforced disappearance under international law. Additionally, the detention of Venezuelan migrants in CECOT lacked a legal basis, making it arbitrary in violation of international human rights law.

Enforced Disappearance

Under international law, an enforced disappearance occurs when authorities, or those acting with their support or acquiescence, deprive a person of their liberty and then refuse to acknowledge the detention or disclose that person's fate or whereabouts, placing them outside the protection of the law.^[97] This practice also inflicts severe suffering on their relatives and loved ones.

The definition of enforced disappearance is set out in the 1992 United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.^[98] El Salvador has ratified the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance^[99] and the 1994 Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons, which also prohibit enforced disappearances.^[100]

Human Rights Watch and Cristosal found that the US and Salvadoran governments repeatedly refused to provide information on the whereabouts and fate of the detained Venezuelans.

The people held in CECOT were unable to communicate with their relatives and lawyers, and neither government published a list or else disclosed the names of the individuals sent to CECOT. *CBS News*, *El Nacional* and other outlets published lists of the people sent there, but the US and Salvadoran governments never confirmed their authenticity.^[101]

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practice. Most relatives and lawyers interviewed said they consulted the ODLs—the tool they had previously used to track the location of detainees during immigration proceedings—but consistently found “no results.” Human Rights Watch cross-checked the case numbers of several deportees in March and April and confirmed that they had been removed from the system.

US lawyers representing some of the people sent to CECOT said that immigration authorities never informed them of their clients’ transfers.^[103]

Relatives of people removed 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.

Some relatives said they emailed the then-Salvadoran presidential commissioner for human rights and freedom of expression, Andrés Guzmán Caballero, but received only an automatic acknowledgment of receipt or a response indicating that their request had been forwarded to the “relevant institutions.”^[104]

Salvadoran courts refused to provide information on the whereabouts or fate of the Venezuelan people sent to the country. Between March and July, Cristosal assisted detainees’ relatives to file 76 habeas corpus petitions before the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court. The chamber has not issued a response.

Despite the lack of information from the US and Salvadoran governments, relatives, activists, journalists, and human rights organizations in the United States, Venezuela and El Salvador

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That night, family members began searching for Tulio, using ICE's online locator system. When they entered his alien number, they first saw an alert that said "Call field office." By the evening of March 14, the system showed that he was at Bluebonnet Detention Center in Anson, Texas, his brother said. His brother called the field office the next morning, on March 15, and was told that his brother had been transferred and was "in transit" to another facility. When he checked again later that day, the system indicated that his brother was in East Hidalgo Detention Center in La Villa, Texas. "I called that center, and they told me he was there awaiting deportation," he said.

On March 17, the system still listed his brother at East Hidalgo, but when he called, an officer told him that his brother had been deported. The officer did not specify where and advised him to contact ICE. "I called ICE, but they told me he was still in Hidalgo and that I needed to wait 24 to 48 hours for the system to update," his brother recalled.

By the morning of March 19, the locator system returned "zero results," he said. From that day on, the ICE system provided no information. His brother was not included in the list of detainees *CBS News* published on March 20.

Tulio's family called ICE multiple times but was repeatedly denied information.^[106] On March 24, they received the first indication that he had been sent to El Salvador. Human Rights Watch reviewed a recording of the call, where an operator and a relative had the following exchange:^[107]

Operator: The person you are trying to find is no longer in custody of ICE because he was removed to his country of origin, El Salvador.

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Relative: To which country was he removed? Because he has not been sent to Venezuela....

Operator: Here it only shows me the date, for that information I have to give you the phone number of the office that was in charge of his case so you can call.

Relative: That office number that you give me, I call and it goes directly to a voicemail, they don't answer me because you have already given me that number on several occasions.

Operator: Then you have to send an email, sir.

(...)

Relative: How do you deport a person without giving them the right to a phone call, without letting them communicate with their family? Since Thursday, March 13, he has been deprived of liberty and he has never called.

Operator: Then call your consulate, sir, call the Venezuelan consulate to see what they advise you as well, but as I said ... sir, here we cannot give you information, this is a call center, we only have some limited information.

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Soraya G., the 23-year-old wife of a Venezuelan migrant detained in the United States, told Human Rights Watch that after losing contact with her husband on March 14, she checked the ICE locator system using his alien number—the same one she used to send him money so he could call her—but found no result.^[110] “They had taken him out of the system,” she said. “I tried to call ICE, but nobody answered. I spent the night without sleep from the anguish.”

For several days, she could not find any trace of him in the system or through ICE hotlines. Soraya said she only learned that he was in El Salvador about five days later, when she saw his name on a list published by *CBS News*. “I called ICE again.... An officer told me that he had been deported. I asked where to, and he told me he couldn’t say.” She recalled asking the reason for his deportation, since her husband had entered through the CBP One appointment system and was in the middle of his asylum process. “The officer told me he had been deported because he had entered illegally.”

Carmenza J., a 47-year-old mother of one of the Venezuelans detained by ICE, said that the last time she spoke with her son was on March 15.^[111] “Mom, see you at home. ICE told me they are sending us to Venezuela today,” she recalled he said.

After that call, she lost contact with him. “On March 16, I asked several people in Caracas if flights from the United States had arrived, and they told me no. I checked the ICE [locator] system and it showed zero results and they didn’t answer the phone,” she said.

She asked a relative in the United States to call ICE. “They answered him once and told him they couldn’t give any information. They just said not to call again because my son was no longer in the United States,” she recounted. “That was horrible for me and my family, especially for my grandson, because we thought he had disappeared. My grandson asked about his father every day, and I didn’t know what to tell him.” Carmenza said she called ICE

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detention center in El Valle [in Texas] ... that same day they [ICE officials] removed him from the system," she said. She tried calling ICE but received no response. "I kept calling for the next five days. On the fifth day, an officer answered and told me, 'He was deported, he's outside the United States, I can't tell you where,' and then she hung up," Abigail said. "I called again, crying in desperation, and the same officer answered and told me, 'Don't insist, they're no longer here, find a lawyer to help you.'"

Detention Without a Legal Basis

Under international human rights law, any deprivation of freedom must, among other requirements, have a basis in law. Arbitrary detention is prohibited.^[113]

Human Rights Watch and Cristosal have been unable to identify any actual or even purported legal basis for the detention of Venezuelan migrants in CECOT. On April 5, Human Rights Watch sent a letter to El Salvador's minister of justice and public security and to the then-presidential commissioner for human rights and freedom of expression requesting information on the identity of those detained, their conditions of detention in CECOT, and the legal basis for their detention.^[114] On April 25, the presidential commissioner for human rights and freedom of expression replied, stating that his office did not have the requested information. The minister of justice and public security did not respond.^[115]

In March and April, Cristosal formally requested access to public information from several Salvadoran government institutions—including the General Directorate of Prisons, the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson, the Presidency, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—seeking the official list of Venezuelans deported from the United States to Salvadoran prisons, as well as a copy of the agreement between the two governments

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On April 11, Human Rights Watch issued a press release calling on the government of El Salvador to "disclose whether there is any legal basis" for these persons' detention.^[118] Yet to Human Rights Watch's and Cristosal's knowledge, Salvadoran authorities have not made any efforts to point to any possible legal basis.

In response to a communication from the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the government of El Salvador denied that its authorities had "detained" these people, indicating that they had rather "facilitated the use of the Salvadoran prison infrastructure for the custody of persons detained within the scope of the justice system and law enforcement of that other State," meaning, the United States. The government of El Salvador did not cite a basis for their detention.^[119]

In May 2025, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, the Boston University School of Law International Human Rights Clinic, the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, and the Global Strategic Litigation Council filed a request for precautionary measures before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, urging the commission to order the immediate release of hundreds of people detained in CECOT.^[120] The organizations said El Salvador asked the commission to dismiss the case following the return of the Venezuelan migrants to Venezuela.^[121] The commission has yet to issue a decision.

IV. Torture, Sexual Violence, and Other Forms of Ill-Treatment in CECOT

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abuse from the moment they arrived in the country. These abuses amounted to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and, in many cases, torture under international human rights law.

Former detainees recounted the abuses they suffered and corroborated accounts by other interviewees, including those who were their cellmates or were held in adjacent cells within their line of sight. This allowed Human Rights Watch researchers to cross-reference allegations and incident accounts. Additionally, whenever possible, Human Rights Watch obtained photos of the injuries suffered by the detainees and solicited expert opinions from the Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG) of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT).

Human Rights Watch and Cristosal concluded that the cases of torture and ill-treatment of Venezuelans in CECOT were not isolated incidents by rogue guards or riot police, but rather systematic violations that took place repeatedly throughout the Venezuelan migrants' detention. In fact, this conclusion is inescapable. All the former detainees interviewed reported being subjected to serious physical and psychological abuse on a virtually daily basis and throughout their entire detention.

The beatings and other abuses appear to be part of a practice designed to subjugate, humiliate, and discipline detainees through the imposition of grave physical and psychological suffering. The brutality and repeated nature of the abuses also appear to indicate that guards and riot police acted on the belief that their superiors either supported or, at the very least, tolerated their abusive acts.

According to the people held in CECOT, the most severe beatings and abuses took place on the way to or inside the punishment cells known as "the Island." Guards took detainees there

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times. Several interviewees said that guards restricted their access to food, water and medicine during their confinement.

In addition to the periodic beatings, several former detainees told Human Rights Watch that guards subjected them to other forms of ill-treatment. They said guards tightened their handcuffs excessively or stepped on them while they were in what guards called "search position"—handcuffed and shackled, forced to kneel with their hands behind their heads—, sprayed pepper spray at them without any provocation, shouted at them constantly, accused them of being criminals, and used degrading language. Others said guards threatened them and their relatives, telling them they would never leave alive, that they had been sentenced to 100 to 200 years in prison, and that they would never see their families again.

Beatings

Former detainees said they were subject to periodic beatings when guards conducted searches of their cells, when they considered that detainees had broken the prison's rules, and in some cases when they requested medical attention. They also described when the beatings and torture they suffered occurred, and identified times throughout their detention, including:

- Upon arrival in El Salvador and as they were transferred to CECOT
- Following the visit of US Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem
- Following visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in early May and mid-June

• Following two protests by detainees that took place in April and May

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and waist, with their heads lowered, and beat them again as they made their way down. The beatings continued—with fists, kicks, and batons—as the detainees were herded onto buses that transported them to CECOT.

Once inside CECOT, guards took the detainees to an area where, they said, other prisoners in yellow uniforms, acting under guards' orders, shaved their heads. Guards then forced them to strip, put on a prison uniform, and shackled them by their wrists and ankles before loading them onto another bus to Module 8, where the beatings continued. According to their testimonies, just meters before the entrance, riot police and guards forced the new arrivals to run a gauntlet of prison guards, who beat them with batons, fists, and kicks as they entered. Former detainees said those who fell were forced back on their feet and beaten more severely.

- **Julián G.** was taken off the plane in El Salvador by a riot police officer who hit him several times in the ribs with the butt of his rifle.^[124] Between the plane and the bus, he struck him several more times in the back of the neck and back. Once he arrived at the entrance of CECOT, he said an officer hit him and pulled him off the bus. "He punched me in the ribs so hard that I couldn't breathe. Then they took me inside, made me kneel, and shaved my head."

On the bus to Module 8, Julián said, guards joked among themselves, saying, "Bukele really loves us, he sent us more than 150 gang members to torture." He said he could not walk well because his left foot was injured, and he began hopping on his right foot as he left bus. But guards beat him more. "At one point, my right leg gave out, I fell, and a guard grabbed me by the chains on my handcuffs and shackles and caused me intense pain."

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Silvio said he shouted to officers that he couldn't keep running because he was asthmatic and was going to faint. When he fell to the ground, an officer kicked him in the chest and said "Here, we beat those who faint even harder." He pushed Silvio and forced him and others to kneel on the floor as officers punched them in the backs of their necks, calling them "fucking gang members," and ordering them to take off all their clothes.

- When **Marco P.** got off the plane, he said he fell because he could not walk properly and officers shouted "hit him, hit him" until one of them picked him up, pushed him against the bus, and hit him on the head.^[126] Once at the CECOT entrance, he was taken to a room where he said he was beaten. "Those of us with more tattoos were beaten with fists and slapped on our bodies."
- After landing in El Salvador, **Tirso Z.** said that officers pushed him down the stairs of the plane and put him on a bus, where they punched him in the nose, causing it to bleed.^[127] At the entrance of CECOT, he said that he and the other detainees were taken off the bus and forced to kneel as other detainees shaved their heads, and officers took off their handcuffs, told them to get naked, and beat them with batons on their backs, legs, and feet. "When they put the handcuffs back on," he said, "they stood on top of us to hurt our feet. One of the officers hit me with the baton on my back and I fell to the floor."
- **Daniel B.**, a 24-year-old man from Miranda State, said officers beat him with a baton while he disembarked from the plane, striking him in the ribs and stomach.^[128] One officer hit him on the head with a rifle butt to force him onto a bus, where others kicked him in the back and struck him with handcuffs. Upon arriving at the prison, officers continued beating him. "I couldn't get up for two days; I couldn't move," he said. "My ribs hurt, they beat me in the abdomen, on the elbows, on the ankles, in the

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said was consistent with his description of the beatings.^[130]

Beatings Following the Visit of US Homeland Secretary Kristi Noem

Five former detainees said that in the days before US Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem's visit on March 26, 2025, guards gave them personal hygiene items as well as sheets and mattresses.^[131]

On the day of the visit, the secretary entered the module with US and Salvadoran staff for a brief period. Former detainees held in the first cells began shouting, "freedom, freedom," "we are migrants, not terrorists," "we should not be here," and making the letter 'L' with their fingers, in reference to the word "libertad" (freedom in Spanish).^[132] Guards quickly escorted the secretary out of the module.

Former detainees said that roughly 30 minutes after she left, guards entered the module, beat those who had shouted, and restricted their access to water and food for the rest of the day.^[133]



"They took us out of the cell two or three at a time" said **Wilson L.**, a 35-year-old man from Aragua State.^[134]

"We were kneeling in search position

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They said guards took away their food for two days and forbade them to bathe for four or five days. "They took away our toothbrushes, soap, and toothpaste that they had given us before the visit," **Tirso Z.** recalled.^[137]

On March 27, Secretary Noem published a video of her visit to CECOT.^[138] In the video, she appears in front of a cell holding detainees, many of them tattooed, and thanks President Bukele for the partnership with the United States to bring "terrorists" to CECOT and imprison them there. Ten former detainees told Human Rights Watch that the cell shown in the video was not in their module, where they said she first appeared.^[139]

Beatings Following Visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Of the 40 former detainees we interviewed, 32 said they were subjected to severe beatings after ICRC staff visited them on May 7 and June 11 and 12.

During the first ICRC visit, guards entered the module with a list of approximately 50 people, who were taken out to meet with ICRC staff. According to former detainees, the meeting took place in a large room located in another module. They said guards were in the room, at a distance. When the ICRC staff left, detainees said, guards accused all those who participated in the meeting of reporting abuses.

Daniel B. told Human Rights Watch that after the visit officers took him and others to "the Island" as punishment for "complaining to the Red Cross."^[140] They beat him with a baton and hit him in the nose, which he said bled profusely:

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forensic expert said was consistent with Daniel's description of the beatings.^[141]

Daniel said that after the first ICRC visit, guards also beat other detainees in the hallway.

Nelson F. said that he was beaten after the ICRC's first visit.^[142] The guards took him out of the cell, put him in what guards called "search position" in the hallway, and beat him severely—kicking and punching him—for 10 minutes. "It seemed like an eternity," he said.

"They came to search us after the Red Cross left, the first time they came to visit us," said **Carlos J.**, a 27-year-old man from Apure State.^[143] "Those of us who were called by name, after being interviewed ... were badly beaten."

Several former detainees said that guards also beat them following ICRC's second visit in mid-June. ICRC officials interviewed all Venezuelan detainees. Detainees said that afternoon and in the days following the visit, guards took them out of their cells, made them kneel down, and kicked, punched, and hit them with black batons.

Félix D., a 27-year-old man from Táchira State, said that he participated in a small group meeting with ICRC staff and five other detainees.^[144] He said guards were likely able to listen from a distance. "There were many guards present. During the interview, we told the official everything that had happened to us—the beatings and more," he said.

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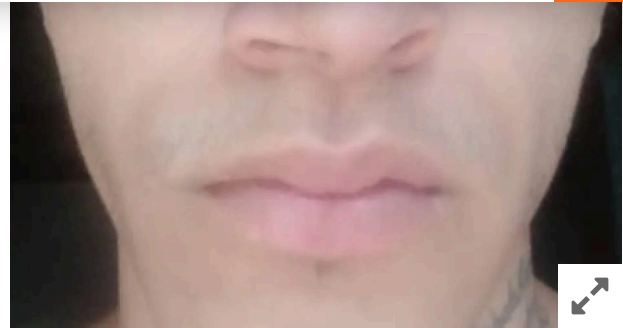


Photo of Daniel's nose after the beatings at CECOT. © 2025 Private



Leopoldo R. said that the day after he spoke with ICRC officials, guards entered his cell, took the detainees out, and brought them to the punishment cell.^[146] He said that two guards shackled his wrists and ankles, dragged him out, and shouted that they were doing it because he “complained to the Red Cross.” He said guards beat him with punches and kicks, forced him to kneel facing the wall, and one of them stepped on the shackles around his feet, causing excruciating pain. “The pain was unbearable; I nearly fainted from the beating,” he said.

He and the other detainees taken from his cell were beaten and then left shackled and locked in the punishment cell for about six hours without food, water, or light.

Beatings and Other Use of Force During Protests

The people held in CECOT said they staged four protests and that in several cases guards responded with beatings and excessive force.

In early April, the Venezuelans carried out a protest after guards beat up a fellow inmate and sprayed pepper spray in his mouth. The detainee fainted. But some detainees thought that the detainee, who they said had asthma, was dead.^[147]

His cellmates threw the few objects they had in their cell—including plastic cups used for drinking water from the tank, water, and their sandals—at the guards.^[148]

The disturbance drew the attention of detainees in other cells, who joined the protest and began pulling at the bars of their cells. Many interviewees said that dozens of riot police

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three days and ended after a senior Salvadoran government official visited them and, according to the interviewees, promised that if they ended the strike there would be no more beatings.^[152] The beatings, however, continued.

On the first day of the hunger strike, some also organized what they called a "blood strike." "The blood strike was that we started writing 'we are migrants, not terrorists' with our blood on a bed sheet and passed it to another cell to hang it up as a banner," **Ernesto R.**, a 20-year-old man from Zulia State, said.^[153] He said he sharpened a piece of aluminum found in a water tank and that he and three others used it to cut themselves and write on a bed sheet.^[154]

In mid-May, another protest took place, former detainees said, after they saw guards beating two cellmates during a search.^[155] Guards struck one detainee in the face, causing a cut to his eyebrow that bled profusely. In response, his cellmates threw the few objects they had at the guards, including water from the tanks, and physically confronted some of them to force their way out of the cell into the module's hallway. Detainees in nearby cells grabbed onto the bars and threw objects at the guards.^[156]

Several former detainees told Human Rights Watch that the protest escalated after some of them managed to break open at least three cell locks and move into the module hallway. Dozens of riot police arrived, they said.^[157] "That day they shot me in the chest with a rubber pellet," said **Gonzalo Y.**^[158] "When I got out of the cell and was opening the lock of another [cell], the riot police arrived, and one of them shot me from about two meters away."^[159]

Javier L. said that when detainees from another cell managed to get out, a swarm of officers came in with firearms and started firing kinetic impact projectiles, also called rubber pellets: "They shot us with pellets, all the cells.... I was hit in the left leg and another guy ... was hit in

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Photo of a wound on Mateo R.'s hand from a rubber pellet. © 2025 Private

the cell—and hit him in the hand and back with rubber pellets.^[164] Human Rights Watch reviewed a photo of his wound, which a forensic expert said was “highly consistent” with a rubber bullet impact.^[165] The expert said that the fact that the scars remained several months after the incident suggests that the rubber bullet was shot at close range.

Carlos J. told Human Rights Watch that he was left with a mark on his chest from the day he was shot with a rubber pellet.^[166] “That was during the last protest. Even though no one in my cell took part, the riot police stormed in, firing at point-blank range into all the cells. At the time I was in Cell 7. They shot at us through the cell bars

and from the roof,” he said. Human Rights Watch reviewed a photo of his wound, which a forensic expert said was “highly consistent” with a rubber bullet impact.^[167] The expert said that the fact that the scars remained several months after the incident suggests that the rubber bullet was shot at close range.

People held in CECOT said that after the protest, guards beat them every day for a week.

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down and punched and kicked me all over my body.”

The following morning, officers took him to “the Island” again to beat him. He said they beat him with a baton on his face, and broke one of his teeth. Javier shared with Human Rights Watch a photo of his mouth, which a forensic expert said was consistent with his description of the beatings. [170] He recalls passing out and says that when he regained consciousness, his face was covered in blood.



Photo of a wound on Carlos J.’s chest from a rubber pellet. © 2025 Private

Beatings During Cell Searches



Former detainees said guards and riot police beat them periodically with kicks, punches, and baton strikes, most often during daily cell searches.

Several people held in CECOT said that during cell searches, guards stormed into the module shouting,

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to beat us for no reason.”^[173]

“Guards came to search the cells every day,” **Tirso Z.** said. “They took us all out of our cells, made us kneel, handcuffed our hands behind our backs and put our arms on our heads, and beat us with batons, kicks and fists ... and then left us kneeling for 30 or 40 minutes.”^[174]

Nelson F., a 32-year-old man from Caracas, recounted one incident in which officers took him and his cellmates out of the cell and lined them in the hallway for female officers to beat them one by one.^[175] He said they made them kneel against the wall with their hands cuffed against their backs, and hit them 10 times in the chest and stomach. He said that officers beat with batons those who tried to protect themselves.

Former detainees said that the only exceptions to the virtually daily beatings during searches throughout their stay in CECOT were on the days leading up to official visits—when guards stopped the beatings at least three days in advance—and during the week before their release and transfer back to Venezuela.

“The beatings stopped two or three days before,” said **Leonel H.** “During those days they gave us some things—mattresses, soap, or extra food. But then they took everything away again.”^[176]

Carlos J. told Human Rights Watch that during searches, guards routinely handcuffed detainees, forced them to kneel in the hallway with their hands on their heads, and beat them.^[177] “Every time they carried out searches, they came in to beat us,” he said.

“The only times they didn’t beat us were when visits were expected,” he said. “Once, when some [US] senators were coming, they stopped beating us two or three days beforehand, and

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we could only bathe at 4 a.m.; eat at the fixed times—5 a.m. for breakfast, 11 a.m. for lunch, and 5 p.m. for dinner; and sleep at 9 p.m. Anything we did outside those hours was punished.^[178]

Several detainees said they were severely beaten for allegedly violating these rules:

- **Guillermo T.**, a 33-year-old man from Anzoátegui State, said that officers handcuffed him and took him out of his cell to "the Island" as punishment for bathing at the wrong time.^[179] He said that guards hit him in the stomach, back, ribs, and thighs with the palms of their hands, and punched and kicked him. He said that after the beatings, guards forced him to kneel with his hands cuffed behind his back and stood on his handcuffs, causing him pain. Then, he said, they left him locked in "the Island" for approximately six hours.
- **Ernesto R.** said that the first day he woke up in his cell, he refused to eat breakfast.^[180] An officer handcuffed him and took him to "the Island," where four officers beat him, he said. He said they threw him to the floor, and one stepped on his handcuffs. He screamed and the guards punched and kicked him. He said he was beaten for around five minutes until they took him back to his cell. The next day, an officer reprimanded him for laughing with a cellmate. The guards took him back to "the Island," where he said they beat him for 10 minutes. Then one of the officers took out a yellow-capped bottle of pepper spray and sprayed it in his face. "I couldn't breathe, there was no water," he said. He took off his shorts and put them over his face to calm the burning feeling, and then he "collapsed" on the floor. He said that when he woke up, officers punched him in the head and ribs and then took him back to his cell.
- **Felipe C.**, a 25-year-old man from Caracas, was beaten in the punishment cell several times.^[181] He described one incident when officers beat him for laughing with his

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- **Rodrigo A.** was beaten after he refused to take tuberculosis pills that, former detainees said, guards gave to all of them.^[182] "I didn't want to take any more pills," he said. After refusing, three officers took him out of his cell to "the Island," where they beat him for five minutes, he said.

Another day, Rodrigo had a fever and asked one of the guards if he could shower outside of designated bathing hours, he said. The guard didn't let him. When he showered anyway, a guard monitoring the cell from the roof saw him, and two officers later took him out of the cell in handcuffs to "the Island." "They sat me down facing forward with my hands cuffed behind my back and started punching me for about five minutes. They also insulted me with profanity and bad words that I don't want to repeat," he said. They left him locked up in the punishment cell for five hours without water.

Rodrigo said he was confined to "the Island" a third time after he tried to get officers to stop beating a young man who was crying from the pain. Officers took him and two others to the punishment cell where they beat them and locked them up for five hours, he said.

"The situation was very confusing, you no longer knew what you could or couldn't do, we were desperate," he recalled.

- **Miguel Z.** described an incident in which officers punished him for showering outside of designated hours.^[183] Officers took him out of his cell in handcuffs to "the Island" and made him kneel as six of them beat him, hit him with batons, and kicked him. They struck him in the face, splitting his eyebrow open. He said he fell on the floor because he couldn't take the beatings anymore. But an officer grabbed his handcuffs and lifted

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- **Flavio T.** said that guards punished entire cells even when only one detainee broke a rule.^[185] "If one of us made noise, they took us out and beat us all," he said. "They hit us with sticks, kicked us with their boots, and struck us in the ribs. They punched us, handcuffed us, and kept beating us."
- **Rigoberto F.**, a 31-year-old man from Zulia State, told Human Rights Watch that he was punished along with all his cellmates because one of them made noise.^[186] "One day, a cellmate made a lot of noise. They took all of us out because of him—we all paid for one person," he said. "They handcuffed us, forced us to kneel, stepped on our heels, and beat us with their knees and batons."

Beatings for Requesting Medical Attention

Although some detainees received limited medical attention in CECOT, others said that they were beaten for requesting medical assistance, often for injuries caused by guards.

- **Carlos J.** said that he experienced sharp pain in both ears.^[187] After asking for medical attention for days, officers took him to the infirmary. Medical staff told him he had an infection and pus in both ears. He was not given any medication or antibiotics, he said. After returning to his cell, he pressed himself against the bars of the cell and continued to ask officers for medication. Four guards took him out of the cell, brought him to the hallway and beat him for several minutes in the back, stomach, and legs. They hit him with handcuffs and batons, and kicked and punched him in the chest, he said. "They beat me until I vomited blood." Officers locked him in a punishment cell for three days.
- **Luis S.** said the beatings he suffered knocked out a tooth and ruptured a ligament in

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Three former detainees told Human Rights Watch and Cristosal that they were subjected to sexual violence during their time in CECOT. One of them said that sexual violence was more common than reported, since other detainees were unlikely to speak about what they had suffered due to stigma.

- **Mario J.** said that during the week following the first protest, guards took him and his cellmates into the hallway for a medical examination.^[190] After the exam, several guards took him to “the Island,” where they beat him. He said four guards sexually abused him. “They played with their batons on my body,” he said. “They stuck the batons between my legs and rubbed them against my private parts.” Then they forced him to perform oral sex on one of the guards, groped him, and called him “faggot.”
- **Leonel H.** described being repeatedly beaten and sexually harassed while held in CECOT.^[191] He said that when he arrived at the prison and officers ordered him to strip naked, they noticed he had a penis pearl—a form of genital modification in which a small object is surgically or manually inserted under the skin of the penis, often for cultural, aesthetic, or sexual purposes. He said that guards repeatedly took him out of his cell and forced him to strip naked to show the pearl to other guards. When he refused, guards beat him. “The beat me a lot for that,” he said.
- **Nicolás J.** said that during repeated beatings, guards sexually assaulted him.^[192] He said officers grabbed his genitals and made comments of a sexual nature. “They did this to several of us,” he said. “I don’t think the others will tell you that because it’s very intimate and embarrassing.”

Verbal and Psychological Abuse

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"The hardest part was that the guards told us we would never get out of there, that our families had given us up for dead," said **Flavio T.** to Human Rights Watch.^[194]

"The psychological torture was not knowing what would happen to us—what our future would be, whether our families knew where we were. It was terrible, not knowing what was going to happen or if it was true that we would be kept there for life, as they [the guards] said," said **Julián G.**^[195]

Such psychological abuse may amount to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under international law.

V. Inhumane Conditions in CECOT

All the former detainees Human Rights Watch and Cristosal interviewed said they endured inhumane conditions, including prolonged incommunicado detention, unsanitary conditions, and inadequate food and health care. These conditions in their totality may amount to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under international law. Unsurprisingly, they also bear no resemblance to the conditions called for under the minimum adequate treatment of prisoners laid out in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of

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Former detainees were held incommunicado in Module 8 of CECOT, without access to legal assistance or contact with the outside world. Despite repeated requests from several detainees, guards never allowed them to make phone calls to their relatives or lawyers.

"The hardest part was not knowing what was going to happen, what my future would be, not having access to a lawyer or understanding why we were there," said **Miguel Z.**^[199] "Not being able to speak with our families—without even knowing if they knew we were in El Salvador—we knew nothing. Not being able to talk to our loved ones and basically anyone, that was the worst."^[200]

All interviewees said that guards placed them in groups of about 10 per cell. During their detention, guards repeatedly moved them from one cell to another, placing them with larger or smaller groups. Although the cells provided enough space, detainees said they were forbidden from speaking to people in other cells and, in many cases, even to others in their own cell unless it was in a whisper.

The only times detainees were allowed to interact with people other than guards or prisoners were during two humanitarian visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). However, because of the ICRC's humanitarian mandate, which precludes the ICRC from publicly divulging the findings of its prison visits, and the limited nature of these visits, they cannot be considered an interruption of the regime of incommunicado detention.

Denial of Basic Hygiene and Sanitation

"The conditions were horrific," **Julián G.**, a 29-year-old former detainee said.^[201] "There was mold, the floor was black and sticky, the toilets were filthy, it smelled of urine, and the water

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"They never gave us a change of clothes. Hygiene conditions were very poor; everything was filthy. The drains smelled like sewage," **Gonzalo Y.**, a 26-year-old man from Zulia State, told Human Rights Watch.^[204] "They gave us very little detergent to wash with, because we had to clean the place ourselves, but it was never enough. The floor was dirty. They gave us soap only once a week, and in very small amounts. There was mold, and our feet itched if we were barefoot."^[205]

They also said that the quality of the water in the tanks, which were refilled daily, was extremely poor—sometimes yellowish or even greenish in color, with visible vermin. Yet they had no choice but to use it for drinking and bathing.^[206]

Before scheduled visits, mostly from US and Salvadoran government delegations, prison officials made cosmetic changes by providing items such as sheets, pillows, mattresses, and hygiene products, until the dignitaries left. After the visits, guards took most of these items away. Some detainees managed to hide a few, but during the frequent cell searches, and sometimes as apparent punishment, guards confiscated them.

All interviewees said they had no hygiene products or privacy when using the toilets or bathing, as these areas were fully exposed to everyone in the cell and to people passing through the corridor.

"To use the bathroom we had no soap, no toilet paper, nothing. We had to clean ourselves with water and with the same hands we later used to eat. The treatment was degrading—worse than if we were animals," said **Nelson F.**^[207]

Without enough personal hygiene or cleaning supplies, former detainees said the cells

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Inadequate Food

Interviewees also described inadequate food provision, including small portion sizes, food of poor quality, and food that was sometimes raw or undercooked, and the constant repetition of the same meals throughout their detention.^[210]

Javier L. said: "For breakfast we got beans with a tortilla, sometimes a small cookie with cream, and a coffee-like drink with a little sugar. At lunch, they gave us rice with pasta, two tortillas, and a boxed juice—nothing else.... We were all left hungry. For dinner, we got beans with a tortilla and a juice again. That's how it was the whole time."^[211]

On at least two occasions, former detainees said that guards brought them different meals, but said the food was still of poor quality and lacked adequate nutritional value.

"One day they [the guards] took us out to the module corridor and gave us a Subway sandwich. That was before a visit from some US and Salvadoran officials," said **Marco P.**^[212] "About 15 days later, they gave us hamburgers with fries, and that was before the visit of an American official."^[213]

Some former detainees also said that guards deprived them of food and water on multiple occasions as a form of punishment, particularly when they were taken to "the Island." "Sometimes they didn't give us food or water," **Daniel B.** told Human Rights Watch.^[214]

Lack of Access to Adequate Health Care and Medicine

Most interviewees told Human Rights Watch that medical staff were present in the prison's

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asked guards almost daily to see a doctor for his medication, but the doctor never gave it to him.^[217]

Thirty-seven of the 40 former detainees we interviewed said they became ill at CECOT. They said guards ignored their requests for medical attention, forcing them to wait one to three days before taking them to the infirmary. Once there, medical staff carried out only limited examinations, such as checking temperature and blood pressure, while dismissing their conditions despite visible symptoms including fever, skin rashes, bleeding from beatings, dark urine, and extreme weakness. At most, they said, medical staff administered sleeping pills or painkillers.

"One day I was feeling sick, I wanted to throw up and my head hurt a lot, so I asked a guard to tell the nurse," **Julián G.** told Human Rights Watch.^[218] "The next day, a guard took me to the infirmary. They took my blood pressure, and it was high. They kept me there for five days, measuring my blood pressure, and the doctor diagnosed me with hypertension. They gave me pills.... But most of my fellow inmates didn't get anything. The doctor said we had to drink more water, and the pain would go away."^[219]

Thirty-one former detainees said that during medical visits they received no medication at all. They said medical staff only advised them to drink more water each day.

Lack of Recreational or Educational Activities

All former detainees told Human Rights Watch that during most of their time in CECOT they remained locked inside their cells and were never allowed outdoors. Guards only occasionally allowed them to step into the module's central corridor to exercise.^[220]

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"Between lunch and dinner, we played 'Parcheesi' [a table game]," said **Javier L.**^[224] "We drew a board on the floor with the soap they gave us to bathe and used tortillas to make the pieces and dice."^[225]

VI. Return to Venezuela

I'm on alert all the time because every time I heard the sound of keys and handcuffs, it meant they were coming to beat us.

—Daniel B., a 24-year-old from Miranda State, Venezuela, July 29, 2025^[226]

On April 20, 2025, President Bukele proposed a prisoner exchange with the Venezuelan government, offering to repatriate 252 Venezuelan detainees from CECOT in return for the release of an equal number of political prisoners in Venezuela, some of whom Bukele named.^[227]

On July 18, President Bukele announced that the governments had reached an agreement.^[228] El Salvador released 252 Venezuelans from CECOT and returned them to Venezuela in

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A few days before July 18, interviewees noticed something was changing. Guards stopped beating them, provided hygiene and personal care items, and gave them medical attention. Then, the detainees were informed that they would be transferred to Venezuela.

"Two or three days before we left, they gave us mattresses and good food and took photos of us," **Daniel B.** said.^[233] "They brought dentists, fixed [someone's] tooth, cleaned us up, shaved us, gave us soap and other things, and the next day, in the early morning, they came to get us and brought us to Venezuela."^[234]

Former detainees said that upon their return to Venezuela, authorities carried out medical check-ups and background checks before taking them to their homes. They also allowed them to contact their relatives and, in some cases, authorities reissued identity documents.

They continue, however, to suffer psychological harm and have not received any psychological support.

Javier L. said he is depressed and feels psychologically abused: "I feel like I've lost everything ... the time I didn't spend with my daughter. We lived in fear, thinking that every time they came into the module it was to beat us," he said.^[235]

Mateo R. said: "I am psychologically affected, sometimes I can't sleep, I wake up anxious, sweaty and feeling very bad, sometimes I feel depressed, stressed. I need psychological support."^[236]

Felipe C. said that he suffers psychologically: "Now I have psychological problems as a result of my detention in CECOT. I wake up traumatized, thinking that they are going to arrest me

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repression or in search of a better future, has not improved.

Although most interviewees told Human Rights Watch they have not faced persecution or threats from Venezuelan authorities or armed or criminal groups, at least two former detainees said agents of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN) visited them in their homes after their return. The agents said the visits were "part of a monitoring process," and asked them to record videos about their detention in the United States, the treatment they received, and asked them, among other questions, whether they had connections with US agencies seeking to "destabilize the government."

"Two police officers from SEBIN came to my house ... the first time to take photos of the house," Félix D. said.^[239] "The second time, they recorded videos of me saying bad things about the United States. They asked me about my stay in [a US state] and told me I had to say that there was a lot of crime and gangs in the United States, that everyone has tattoos, and that I was detained because of a tattoo."^[240]

"I am currently living in fear," he added.^[241]

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Raphling, US program associate director; Cristian González Cabrera, LGBT rights senior researcher; Mark Hiznay, crisis, conflict and arms associate director; Lucy McKernan, UN deputy director; Martina Rapido Ragozzino, North Andes researcher.

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