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Inside Trump's \$6mn deportee deal with El Salvador mega-prison



Nelson Renteria

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Riot police and prison guards on alert inside the CECOT mega-prison in El Salvador, April 4, 2025.
Thomson Reuters Foundation/Nelson Renteria

What's the context?

The US has sent hundreds of Venezuelans to El Salvador's CECOT prison in a controversial deal blasted by lawyers and rights groups.

- Hundreds of Venezuelans deported to Central American nation
- US pays El Salvador to detain expelled migrants
- Deportation deal faces challenges in US courts

TECOLUCA, El Salvador - Behind the high concrete walls of El Salvador's notorious mega-prison, more than 250 Venezuelans deported in March from the United States remain locked up as President Donald Trump ramps up his mass deportations.

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But the deportation deal is fraught with complications. As attorneys and relatives of many deportees deny they have gang ties, battles are being fought over their right to due process and concerns are growing over the conditions inside CECOT.



A group of alleged gang members remain locked in cells, while a delegation of officials and journalists observe the conditions of the CECOT mega-prison in El Salvador, April 4, 2025. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Nelson Renteria

The United States deported more than 250 alleged members of the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua, along with 23 suspected MS-13 gang members and

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Legal blows to deportations

The use of El Salvador to dump deportees is being fought out in U.S. courts.

The U.S. Supreme Court on Thursday ordered the administration to "facilitate" the return of Salvadoran Kilmar Abrego Garcia after he was sent to CECOT despite an immigration court order against him being placed there due to the risk of persecution.

Judges in Texas and New York on April 9 dealt twin blows to Trump's effort to revive deportations of alleged Venezuelan gang members under the Enemies Act after the Supreme Court ruled the administration could expel people under the rule.

This marked victories for the American Civil Liberties Union, which is seeking to prevent further deportations of alleged gang members under the 18th century law.

Family members, many of whom say those deported have no gang affiliation, are fearful about their fate.

The Venezuelan prisoners, who have not committed any crimes in El Salvador and have not been tried in local courts, have not been seen publicly since last month.

No family visits are allowed at the mega-prison, which human rights groups say is overcrowded with harsh conditions.

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Security agents monitor the CECOT mega-prison in El Salvador from above, April 4, 2025. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Nelson Renteria

International law

Defense attorneys say details have not been released about the prisoners' confinement and they have not been able to communicate with them, despite international law giving them that right.

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During an April 4 visit to the sprawling CECOT complex, Context witnessed unidentified inmates sitting in cells on metal bunks, dressed in white clothes with their heads shaved.

The prisoners, who were not the alleged Venezuelan gang deportees, intently observed the procession of journalists who accompanied a guided tour by Costa Rican officials visiting El Salvador to evaluate the prison system.

Some inmates could be seen undergoing medical checkups, doing physical exercise or listening to religious talks about forgiveness and repentance, all under close watch by masked guards and riot gear-clad police officers.

No authorisation was provided to the media to speak to inmates or prison staff.

'Great friend'

El Salvador has become a key partner of the Trump administration in its deportation juggernaut.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has praised Bukele as "not only the strongest security leader in our region, he's also a great friend of the U.S."

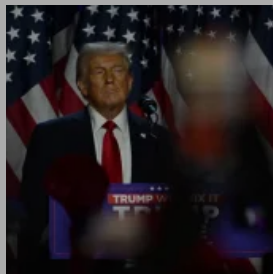
Rubio hailed the \$6 million deal for El Salvador to house migrants, saying it will hold accused gang members in "very good jails at a fair price that will also save our taxpayer dollars."

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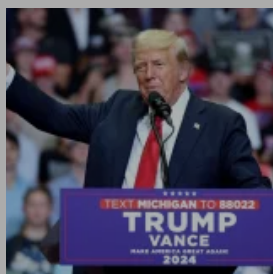


In Data: The economic cost of Trump's mass deportation plan



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But local and international human rights organisations have denounced the imprisonment of innocent Salvadorans with no gang ties for lacking due process or fair trials.

"People being deported to El Salvador to be confined in the CECOT are being sent to a prison system of terror where they are held in absolute isolation, where they are not allowed to exercise their right to defense," said David Morales, a lawyer at Cristosal, a group defending rights in Central America.

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Updated: December 12, 2025

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In Data: The economic cost of Trump's mass deportation plan



Everything you need to know about Trump's deportation plans

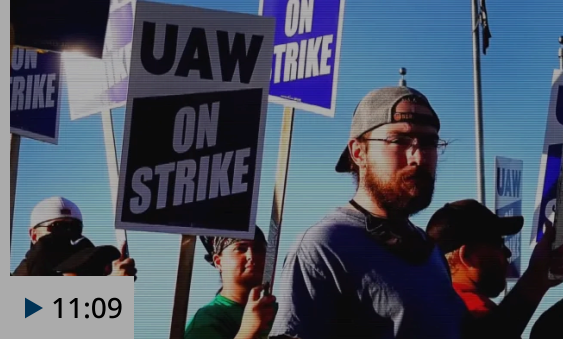
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