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NEWS

What Are US Taxpayers Getting in \$6 Million Deal With Salvadoran Mega-Prison?

By [Sukey Lewis](#)  May 7, 2025

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President Trump meets with President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador in the Oval Office on April 14, 2025. The Trump administration has cut an unprecedented deal to send alleged



In an unprecedented deal with a foreign government, the United States has paid millions of dollars to El Salvador for the incarceration of about 300 Venezuelan and Salvadoran nationals — many of whom were labeled terrorists and deported without due process under [the Alien Enemies Act of 1798](#), an obscure wartime law.

But the exact terms of the controversial arrangement to hold these men in a crowded, foreign mega-prison — one that's been cited for human rights violations — remain murky, even as lawyers, [lawmakers](#) and the public seek answers.

In an email to KQED, a U.S. State Department spokesperson described the payment as “funding for El Salvador’s law enforcement and anticrime needs,” which was “provided in connection with the Government of El Salvador’s offer to receive Venezuelan Tren de Aragua (TdA) gang members removed from the United States.”



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KQED has filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the agreement, but has yet to receive responsive documents.

On Tuesday, 14 media organizations, including NPR, *The New York Times* and the *Associated Press*, filed a [motion to intervene](#) in the case of wrongly-deported Maryland man Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia, asking the judge to unseal recent filings and release the transcript of an apparently secret proceeding that took place on April 30. KQED is an NPR member station.





“The case raises profound questions of separation of powers, civil liberties, and foreign relations,” the filing reads. “Such a case requires maximum transparency so that ‘the public [can] participate in and serve as a check upon’ their government.”

While much of the dollars-for-detention deal remains mired in secrecy, court filings, government press conferences and officials’ social media statements contain hints about the scope and legality of the unorthodox arrangement. Here’s what to know:

President Nayib Bukele makes an offer

Last July, then-U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Florida) lauded the massive maximum-security complex, known as Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo, or CECOT, during a visit to El Salvador.

“There’s a lot more discipline in this prison than we see in a lot of the prisons in the United States,” Gaetz said in a [video](#) President Nayib Bukele posted on social media platform X. “And there are a lot more murderers *here*.”





Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Florida, speaks during the House Judiciary Committee hearing on Oversight of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on Capitol Hill in Washington, on July 26, 2023. (Jose Luis Magana/AP Photo)



Gaetz expressed admiration for El Salvador's "state of exception," the legal mechanism Bukele invoked to suspend many constitutional rights for Salvadorans to combat gang violence in the country. The crackdown has led to a sharp reduction in homicides and the mass incarceration of tens of thousands of people since 2022.

"We think the good ideas in El Salvador actually have legs and can go to other places and help other people be safe and secure and hopeful and prosperous," Gaetz said, the brightly lit bars of prisoners' cells visible behind him.

Then in February, Bukele took to X to offer the United States "the opportunity to outsource part of its prison system." In this post, Bukele stated that El Salvador will accept "only convicted criminals (including convicted U.S. citizens)" into CECOT.





➔ **Trump Administration Considers Immigration Detention on Bay Area Military Base, Records Show**

Secretary of State Marco Rubio was visiting El Salvador at the time and **met with** Bukele to discuss the offer. Rubio said in a March **press conference** that the verbal agreement reached during that visit was later finalized.

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Bukele “wanted assurances” that the Venezuelans he’d agreed to lock up really were members of the gang.

In court filings, Robert Cerna, an ICE official responsible for removal operations in South Texas, declared that the agency “carefully vetted each individual alien to ensure they were in fact members of TdA.”

Family members and attorneys for some of the men have **vehemently denied** their ties to the Venezuelan gang. (U.S. officials have clearly made mistakes in this process, as the related **case** of Abrego Garcia demonstrates.)

Dr. Doug Specht, who is an expert on **Central America, human rights and communications** at the University of Westminster in the United Kingdom, said it is extremely “unusual for any country to want to — for want of a better phrase — import people who are accused of violent and extreme crimes.”

Adding to the irregularity of the arrangement is El Salvador’s willingness to accept deportees who were not Salvadoran, but Venezuelan nationals.

“That’s not a repatriation, it’s not an extradition,” Specht said. “That is a movement of human beings beyond their nationality into a state of which they have no rights.”

Price tag: \$6 million

In a March 16 **post on X**, Bukele touted the arrival of “the first 238 members” of Tren de Aragua from the United States. He said they would be imprisoned in “CECOT, the Terrorism Confinement Center, for a period of one year (renewable). The United States will pay a very low fee for them, but a high one for us.”

The next day, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt **said** in a briefing that “approximately \$6 million” had been paid to El Salvador “for the detention of these foreign terrorists.” Leavitt said this fee was “pennies on the dollar” when compared with the cost of housing these individuals in a U.S. maximum security prison.





The average annual cost of housing someone in a U.S. federal prison is about \$44,000, according to a 2024 report by the [U.S. Bureau of Prisons](#). Back-of-the-napkin math shows that \$6 million divided by 300 comes to an annual cost of about \$20,000 per person.

However, without knowing the details of the arrangement, it is difficult to accurately assess any cost savings. The \$6 million figure does not include the costs of transportation to El Salvador or the legal costs of defending the government's arrangement against court challenges.

Specht said the U.S. government's financial motives are secondary to its chief goal. "It's a power play," he said.

While the administration faces an uphill battle legally; politically, it's a winning position, Specht said. "You can't argue back against it without looking like you want to re-import dangerous people."

'A tool in our toolkit'

On March 26, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem also visited CECOT. Her statements in an Instagram [reel](#) underscore the idea that the United States retains a meaningful interest in the detention of the deportees.

She characterized their incarceration there as punishment "for the violence that they perpetuated in our communities." The prison, she said, is now "a tool in our toolkit," and thus, a part of the machinery of the U.S. detention system.





As prisoners stand looking out from a cell, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem speaks during a tour of the Terrorist Confinement Center (CECOT) on March 26, 2025, in Tecoluca, El Salvador. (Alex Brandon-Pool/Getty Images)

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This is important because if the federal government retains custody over the deportees, “it probably would give them the right to bring a habeas corpus here in the United States,” according to Roger Parloff, senior editor of **Lawfare**, a nonprofit publication covering national security. He pointed to a 2004 Supreme Court **ruling**, which found that detainees at the Guantanamo Bay military base in Cuba had the right to challenge their detention in D.C. courts.

Parloff said the ACLU is relying on this ruling to challenge the foreign imprisonment of Venezuelans who were deported and locked up without due process. In **court filings**, the administration has asserted it has no jurisdiction over the individuals held at CECOT.

Along with the Venezuelan nationals, 23 Salvadorans — including Abrego Garcia — who the U.S. government alleges are MS-13 gang members were also put on planes to El Salvador. A judge later determined that Abrego Garcia should never have been sent to El Salvador, and on April 10, the Supreme Court largely **upheld** the lower court’s ruling that the U.S. government must “facilitate” his return.

Four days later, during a **meeting** in the Oval Office, Bukele scoffed at the idea he would return Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran citizen, to the United States: “How can I smuggle a terrorist into the United States?”

Both Bukele and Trump administration officials told journalists they lacked the power to return Abrego Garcia.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-New Hampshire), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, **noted** the “absurdity” of the administration’s position in a letter to Rubio, given that “the administration is funding these detentions.”

Prisoner swap?

Part of the reason the Venezuelan nationals were sent to El Salvador, rather than their home country, is that Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro had refused to receive them, according to **public statements** from Rubio.

Maduro was involved in the “intensive and delicate negotiations” that led to the multimillion-dollar arrangement to send alleged Tren de Aragua members to CECOT, according to a declaration from a senior State Department official.





Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro speaks at the Supreme Court in Caracas, Venezuela, on July 31, 2024. *(Fernando Vergara/AP Photo)*



States.)

In response, on April 22, Bukele made a **counteroffer** — posted in Spanish on X — proposing a “humanitarian agreement that includes the repatriation of 100% of the 252 Venezuelans who were deported, in exchange for the release and delivery of an identical number (252) of the thousands of political prisoners that you hold.” Bukele asked Maduro to let Venezuelan activists and journalists out of prison and to release about 50 foreign prisoners from the U.S. and two dozen other countries.

In an email, a State Department spokesperson said that “while this is a matter for El Salvador and the Maduro regime,” the administration supports the proposal and calls for the immediate release of “all Americans unjustly detained by the Maduro regime.”

Maduro’s deeply unpopular authoritarian rule has plunged Venezuela into an economic and civic crisis, according to analysis from the **State Department** and **international organizations**. Specht sees Bukele’s deal with the U.S. as a strategic move to further disrupt Venezuelan politics and expand his own power.

“That kind of influence will ripple across the region,” Specht said. He worries it won’t end with a deal over a few hundred prisoners: “I’m fearful for what that means for the millions and millions of people who live in these countries who are often just trying to exist.”

Source of funds: ‘Foreign assistance’

While a federal judge has **blocked** further removals under the Alien Enemies Act, the Trump administration clearly made plans to send more people to the prison, costing taxpayers more money.

“Upwards of \$15 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds have been set aside to send to El Salvador to house additional detainees,” Shaheen wrote in her letter to Rubio.

The Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement “supports counter-drug activities through foreign assistance,” according to the 2019 **National Drug Control Strategy**. Shaheen called the use of these funds for the foreign detention of unconvicted deportees “unprecedented and inappropriate.”





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State Department **report** on El Salvador found “significant human rights issues,” which included “life-threatening” and inhumane prison conditions.

The State Department did not confirm the amount of money that had been set aside for this deal going forward, but said its goal is “to ensure our partners are well-equipped to handle the challenges they face, ultimately contributing to a more stable and secure region,” and that it is following “all applicable laws related to foreign assistance, including the Leahy law.”

Specht pointed out that the United States has used foreign assistance money for dubious purposes dating back to the Contra war in Nicaragua and the civil war in El Salvador.

“The idea that this is also being funded through foreign assistance money, rather suggests that the U.S. approach to Latin America hasn’t changed a great deal,” he said.

Along with restrictions on the programs and countries eligible for “foreign assistance,” that spending is also supposed to be transparent.

Transparency implications

“Taxpayers have a right to see where and how American dollars are being used overseas,” then-Sen. Rubio **said** that in 2015, in support of the Foreign Assistance Transparency and Accountability **Act**, which he co-sponsored.

The law, which passed with near-unanimous support, established rigorous reporting and monitoring requirements for foreign assistance, and a public-facing dashboard that the Secretary of State is required to update quarterly to reflect foreign payments.





Secretary of State Marco Rubio speaks during his visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial museum in Jerusalem on Feb. 16, 2025. *(Evelyn Hockstein/AFP via Getty Images)*



Letters to Rubio from Shaheen and **members** of the House Foreign Affairs Committee also invoked the **Case-Zablocki Act**, which requires the Secretary of State to provide Congress with information about all international treaties and agreements.

Parloff, the Lawfare editor, said even non-binding agreements are supposed to be shared if “they could reasonably be expected to have a significant impact on the foreign policy of the United States.”





➡ **Bay Area Japanese Americans Draw on WWII Trauma to Resist Deportation Threats**



and agreement.

The State Department did not answer KQED’s follow-up questions regarding its compliance with transparency laws or the legitimacy of using taxpayer funds to detain people abroad.

While complex legal wranglings are still playing out in U.S. courts, Specht said that in the broadest sense, the deal “flies in the face” of how international law has been understood and interpreted across the world. For the people who are in prison in CECOT, he fears that it may not matter.

“They no longer exist as human beings,” he said. Even if a court finds they were removed illegally, “It’s already too late for most of these people. They won’t be found again.”

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