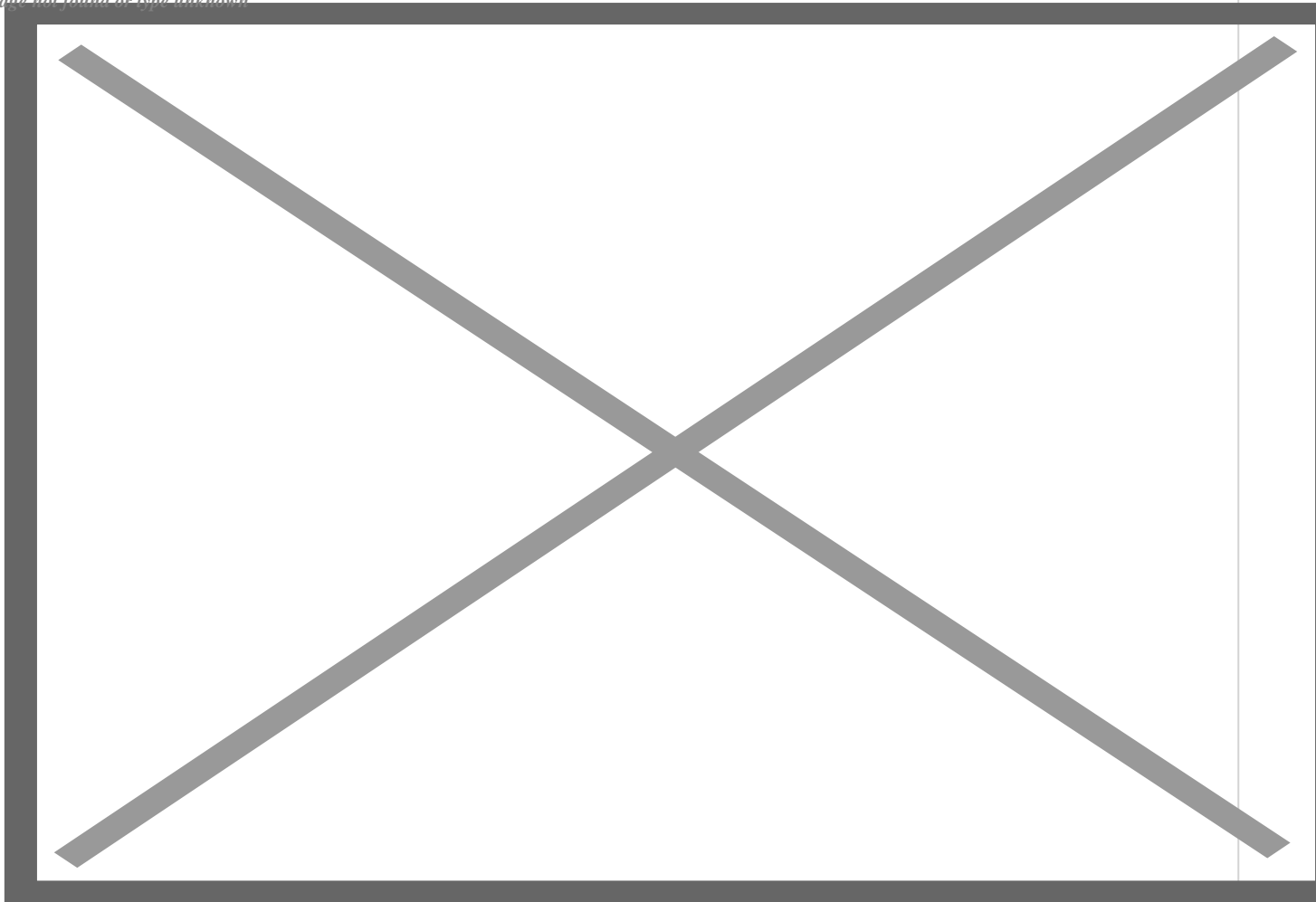


Venezuelan immigrants deported to El Salvador despite U.S. court ban

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Over 200 alleged Tren de Aragua members sent to El Salvador from US amid legal and human rights concerns. Prison guards transfer deportees from the United States, alleged to be Venezuelan gang members, to the Terrorism Confinement Center in Tecoluca, El Salvador [El Salvador presidential press office/AP]

Caracas, March 17 (RHC)-- The United States has flown more than 200 immigrants, alleged members of a Venezuelan gang, to be imprisoned in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele has said, after his US counterpart Donald Trump controversially invoked wartime legislation to expel them.

The deportations on Sunday took place despite a US federal judge granting a temporary suspension of the expulsions order, apparently as planes were already headed to El Salvador.

In a sharp rebuke Sunday, Venezuela's government said Trump had "criminalized" Venezuelan migrants, whom it said were "in their immense majority... dignified and honest" workers, not terrorists. It added that the action violated both US and international laws.

"Oopsie ... Too late," Bukele posted on social media in response to an article on the judge's ruling, adding a crying-with-laughter emoji.

The Trump administration said it was appealing the court order.

White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt defended the deportations, saying Trump was "using his core powers as president and commander-in-chief to defend the American people from an urgent threat".

Bukele announced the action Sunday on X, saying: "Today, the first 238 members of the Venezuelan criminal organization, Tren de Aragua, arrived in our country." He shared a video of several men in handcuffs and shackles being transferred from a plane to a heavily guarded convoy, while the presidency shared a series of photos showing prisoners' heads being shaved, and then hands manacled behind their backs, on their arrival in El Salvador.

Bukele said the U.S. would "pay a very low fee" for El Salvador's custody of the men, but neither he nor American officials specified the amount. Trump on Friday signed an order invoking the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, but it was not publicly announced until Saturday.

The contentious wartime authority allows a U.S. president to detain or deport citizens of an enemy nation, and has been invoked only three times before – during major international conflicts, including World War I and II.

Bukele, in a meeting last month with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, offered to house prisoners from the US in his country, including members of Tren de Aragua and Salvador's own MS-13 gang.

Iron-fisted Bukele is extremely popular in his Latin American country for a successful crackdown on violent gangs, but has faced criticism from human rights groups.

His offer to take in foreign convicts for a fee has divided Salvadorans, who fear it could set back the country's fight against violent crime. Leavitt told the Fox News Sunday Morning Futures programme that Trump "is acting within the bounds of the law".

Bukele said the alleged gang members had been sent to the country's maximum security Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT), a mega-prison on the edge of a jungle 75 km (47 miles) southeast of San Salvador with a capacity for 40,000 prisoners.

Inmates there are packed in windowless cells, sleep on metal beds with no mattresses and are forbidden to have visitors.

Rubio said in a statement on Sunday that as part of the transfer of Venezuela's migrants, the U.S. had deported "top leaders" of MS-13, "plus 21 of its most-wanted to face justice in their homeland".

Trump, in his order, claimed Tren de Aragua was "conducting irregular warfare against the territory of the United States both directly and at the direction, clandestine or otherwise, of the Maduro regime".

The statement gives Trump's Attorney General Pam Bondi 60 days to enact the ruling making all Tren de Aragua gang members "subject to immediate apprehension, detention and removal".

The order will apply to all Venezuelan Tren de Aragua members who are over 14 and not naturalized U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and an allied group, Democracy Forward, asked the US District Court in Washington to bar the deportations – arguing that the 1798 act was not intended for use in peacetime.

Judge James Boasberg on Saturday issued a 14-day halt to any deportation under the new order.

Bondi slammed the ruling, saying in a statement that it "puts the public and law enforcement at risk."

The El Salvador prison where the alleged gang members were sent already houses some 15,000 members of the MS-13 and rival Salvadoran Barrio 18 gangs. They were rounded up under a state of emergency imposed by Bukele after a surge in gang violence in 2022.

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