



WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT EL SALVADOR'S MEGA-PRISON AFTER TRUMP SENT HUNDREDS OF IMMIGRANTS THERE - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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In this photo provided by El Salvador's presidential press office, prison guards transfer deportees from the U.S., alleged to be Venezuelan gang members, to the Terrorism Confinement Center in Tecoluca, El Salvador, Sunday, March 16, 2025.

The crown jewel of El Salvador's aggressive anti-crime strategy — a mega-prison where visitation, recreation and education are not allowed — became the latest tool in U.S. President Donald Trump's crackdown on immigration on Sunday, when [hundreds of immigrants facing deportation were transferred there](#).

The arrival of the immigrants, alleged by the U.S. to be members of the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua gang, took place under an agreement for which the Trump administration will pay the government of President Nayib Bukele \$6 million for one year of services.

Bukele has made the Central American country's stark, harsh prisons a trademark of his fight against crime. In 2023, he opened the Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT, where the immigrants were sent over the weekend even as a federal judge issued an order temporarily barring their deportations under an 18th century wartime declaration targeting Venezuelan gang members.

What is the CECOT?

Bukele ordered the mega-prison built as he began his campaign against El Salvador's gangs in March 2022. It opened a year later in the town of Tecoluca, about 72 kilometers (45 miles) east of the capital.

The facility has eight sprawling pavilions and can hold up to 40,000 inmates. Each cell can fit 65 to 70 prisoners.

CECOT prisoners do not receive visits and are never allowed outdoors. The prison does not offer workshops or educational programs to prepare them to return to society after their sentences.

Occasionally, prisoners who have gained a level of trust from prison officials give motivational talks. Prisoners sit in rows in the corridor outside their cells for the talks or are led through exercise regimens under the supervision of guards.

Bukele's justice minister has said that those held at CECOT would never return to their communities.

The prison's dining halls, break rooms, gym and board games are for guards.

How many prisoners does El Salvador hold?

The government doesn't regularly update the figure, but the human rights organization Cristosal reported that in March 2024 El Salvador had 110,000 people behind bars, including those sentenced to prison and those still awaiting trial. That's more than double the 36,000 inmates that the government reported in April 2021, a year before Bukele ramped up his fight against crime.

Cristosal and other advocates have accused authorities of human rights violations.

Cristosal reported last year that [at least 261 people had died](#) in El Salvador's prisons during the gang crackdown. The group and others have cited cases of [abuse, torture and lack of medical attention](#).

In slickly produced videos, the government has shown CECOT prisoners in boxer shorts marching into common areas and made to sit nearly atop each other. Cells lack enough bunks for everyone.

Why were immigrants sent to CECOT?

The migrants were deported after Trump's declaration of the [Alien Enemies Act](#) of 1798, which has been used only [three times](#) in U.S. history.

The law requires a president to declare the U.S. is at war, giving him extraordinary powers to detain or remove foreigners who otherwise would have protections under immigration or criminal laws. Trump claimed the Tren de Aragua gang was invading the U.S. in invoking the wartime authority.

[Tren de Aragua](#) originated in an infamously lawless prison in Venezuela and accompanied an exodus of millions of Venezuelans, the overwhelming majority of whom were seeking better living conditions after their nation's economy came undone last decade.

The Trump administration has not identified the migrants deported, provided any evidence they are in fact members of Tren de Aragua or that they committed any crimes in the U.S.

Video released by El Salvador's government Sunday showed men exiting airplanes into an airport tarmac lined by officers in riot gear. The men, who had their hands and ankles shackled, struggled to walk as officers pushed their heads down to have them bend at the waist.

The video also showed the men being transported to CECOT in a large convoy of buses guarded by police and military vehicles and at least one helicopter. The men were shown kneeling on the ground as their heads were shaved before they changed into the prison's all-white uniform - knee-length shorts, T-shirt, socks and rubber clogs - and placed in cells.

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Garcia Cano reported from Caracas, Venezuela.