



AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



American
Friends
Service
Committee



Refugees
International

WOLA
Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas

March 27, 2025

President José Raúl Mulino
Foreign Minister Javier Martínez-Acha
Minister of Government Dinoska Yineth Montalvo de Gracia
Government of Panama

Re: U.S. flights of asylum seekers denied access to asylum and due process

Dear President Mulino, Minister Martínez-Acha, and Minister Montalvo de Gracia:

Please receive our warmest regards and appreciation for your country's commitment to upholding human rights. We write as human rights organizations to express our concern about the U.S. government's sending of families and adults seeking asylum to Panama and Panama's role in facilitating unlawful returns. We urge the government of Panama to halt the onward return of individuals in need of international protection, facilitate prompt access to legal counsel and refugee protection, adhere to human rights prohibitions against arbitrary and incommunicado detention, and request that the U.S. government facilitate the return to its country of asylum seekers who were denied the right to lodge asylum claims in the United States.

We do not know what information was shared with your government prior to these third country arrivals from the United States, but media accounts and our own monitoring reveal that U.S. officials refused and failed to provide legally required asylum screenings and due process to people seeking asylum from political, religious, or other persecution while the individuals were in the United States prior to transporting them to Panama. These families and adults [include](#) Iranian Christians and other people seeking asylum from persecution in Afghanistan, China, Uzbekistan and other countries. Many of these countries have well documented track records of political, religious and other persecution, confirming that many of their fears are indeed manifestly well-founded. Some of the people transferred to Panama also have family, religious or other community ties in the United States.

We are gravely concerned that the transfers of the asylum seekers from the United States to Panama do not have a valid basis in U.S. law and violate international law, and that Panama has assisted in these unlawful returns. As you are likely aware, the Trump administration issued

a presidential proclamation that attempts to suspend entry and access to asylum laws enacted by the U.S. Congress. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has invoked this proclamation as authorizing its turning away of asylum seekers, transfers to Panama and, from there, repatriation to countries of origin. This is tantamount to chain refoulement. The transfers occurred without protection screenings required under U.S. law and despite the prohibitions on sending asylum seekers to potential persecution and torture under the Refugee Convention, its Protocol, and the Convention Against Torture.

After their transfer to Panama and initial detention in a hotel in Panama City, some of these individuals have been returned to their home countries while others were sent to a [detention camp](#) at San Vicente where legal counsel and human rights organizations were not provided access. We welcome [reports](#) that they have been released from detention, but are concerned that asylum seekers who do not speak Spanish were not provided orientation, access to humanitarian aid, and issued only very short-term temporary permits.

On February 27, the U.N. Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of Migrants, Gehad Madi, expressed [extreme concern](#) “about the uncertainty of due process and procedural safeguards” in these cases, and highlighted “concerns about the legal and migration status of these individuals, the legal basis for their detention in Panama, their access to a lawyer and information about their rights, their right to communicate with their family, safeguards to challenge the lawfulness of their detention, access to asylum procedures, and guarantees of the principle of non-refoulement.”

We urge the government of Panama to take steps to address these injustices and prevent their repetition. Such steps should include: immediate and unrestricted access to communication with family, legal counsel, U.N. agencies and civil society organizations; the prohibition of refoulement for those with international protection needs; access to full and fair asylum procedures, including access to lawyers; release from detention (should any remain in custody); and, for those who still wish to seek asylum in the United States, the facilitation of their return to the country, with U.S. assurances that legally required asylum processing and due process will be conducted. We also urge that the government of Panama refrain from accepting any further flights of third country nationals from the United States who have not had a full and fair examination of their asylum claims in the United States. Panama should not risk serving as a “bridge” for chain refoulement by facilitating returns of individuals to potential persecution and torture.

We look forward to discussing these matters with government officials, and would like to request a meeting, which we’d be happy to organize virtually, to discuss these recommendations.

Sincerely,

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA (WOLA)

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE (AFSC)

cc:

Director Katherin del Mar, National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR)

Ombudsman Eduardo Leblanc González, Office of the Ombudsman Panama

Tania Renaum, Executive Secretary, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

Andrea Pochak, IACHR Rapporteur for Human Mobility

