

“THIS IS AN ORDER FROM TRUMP”

Abuse, Expulsions, and Refoulement
of People Seeking Asylum

Executive Summary

In its first few months, the Trump administration has used a pattern of enforced disappearances to detain, remove, and expel countless asylum seekers, without any assessment of their asylum claims, in stark violation of U.S. law and international legal obligations. This includes people who reported fleeing [persecution](#) by the government due to their political opinion, [religious persecution](#), anti-LGBTQ attacks, sexual violence, the murders of family members, death threats, and other harms. U.S. immigration officials detained many in abusive and inhumane conditions at the border, denied them legally required fear screenings, and *refouled* (returned) them to potential persecution in their home countries or unlawfully transferred them to third countries where they were subjected to human rights violations. Prior to being expelled or removed, some were pressured or forced to sign documents that in some cases they could not even see because they were shown a blank signature line on a screen. Some have family members, including spouses and children, living in the United States with pending asylum cases from whom they have now been separated.

The administration's actions, in each of these cases, violated laws enacted by Congress to safeguard due process and provide for the fair adjudication of people's requests for protection from persecution. The enforced disappearances of people seeking U.S. protection is part of a broader Trump administration effort to subvert and avoid due process and the checks and balances that are central to the U.S. Constitution. These accounts also starkly lay bare the multiple cruelties inflicted on migrants and people who seek protection from persecution, both in U.S. border custody and after their unlawful transfers to third countries.

Instead of protecting these families and adults from political, religious, and other persecution as required by U.S. and international law, U.S. officials whisked them away in an attempt to place them beyond U.S. law and courts, in some cases returned them to their countries of feared persecution and in other cases sent them to third countries where they were subjected to arbitrary detention. Like the Trump administration's decision to send other asylum seekers and immigrants to a notorious Salvadoran prison, these are dehumanizing tactics routinely employed by repressive and autocratic regimes, rather than a country governed by the U.S. Constitution that should be a champion of human rights and the rule-based order.

Key findings:

- Many asylum seekers detained by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at the southern border who our researchers spoke with went days or weeks without the ability to make a phone call or have any contact with the outside world, including with family and legal counsel. Some asylum seekers reported that they could not make a single call the entire time they were in CBP custody.
- In CBP custody, immigration officers subjected asylum seekers to medical neglect, physical and psychological mistreatment, and unbearable living conditions that are especially traumatizing for children. Some children were detained separately from one or both parents for days or weeks at a time, were hungry and cold, lacked toys to play with, and/or went over a month barely seeing the sun.
- The U.S. government has unlawfully removed and expelled to the countries they fled or to third countries – without a legally required fear screening – families and adults fleeing Afghanistan, Armenia, Ghana, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and other countries, subjecting people to potential persecution via refoulement or chain refoulement, and violating U.S. and international refugee law. This has separated families indefinitely, including parents separated from minor children in the United States with no path to reunite. The administration’s removal and expulsion of nearly [500 migrants](#) in February 2025 to Costa Rica and Panama led to further violations of their rights.
- While the administration is, in some instances, providing very limited screenings to asylum seekers about their fear of torture, the government routinely ignores and removes without any screening asylum seekers who directly communicate with immigration officers regarding their fear of return, and even where provided, these torture screenings are a farce by design.

Policy Recommendations:

We urge the U.S. administration to:

- Restore access to asylum at the southern border as required by U.S. law, refer those fearing persecution or torture to statutorily required fear screenings, and allow those wrongfully removed, expelled, and disappeared to third countries or home countries to return and seek asylum in the United States and/or protection from removal to a third country.
- Immediately cease the transfer of asylum seekers and migrants to third countries in violation of U.S. and international law.
- Ensure compliance with limits on time in CBP custody and detention standards as well as conditions of the *Flores* settlement agreement concerning children. Appropriately fund and staff relevant Department of Homeland Security (DHS) oversight agencies, including the Office of the Immigration Detention Ombudsman, Office of the Inspector General, and Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties to ensure compliance and swift investigation of reported abuses.

- Ensure timely and publicly accessible information on the whereabouts of migrants detained in DHS custody, migrants' access to reasonable in-person and telephonic communication with family and counsel, outcomes of credible fear screenings and torture screenings, and facilitate access to legal counsel of their choosing.

We urge the U.S. Congress to:

- Exercise oversight of past and future agreements between the United States and other countries that involve the removal, expulsion, transfer, or disappearance of migrants and asylum seekers in violation of U.S. and international law, including any use of U.S. funds to effectively *refoule* migrants to places where they are at risk of persecution, torture, enforced disappearances, and other grave human rights violations.
- Conduct oversight of CBP detention facilities, conditions, medical access, separation of families, and treatment of migrants by DHS officers and contractors in compliance with relevant standards, and ensure funding is contingent on compliance.
- Investigate access to asylum and referral to and outcomes of fear screenings for individuals in CBP custody, including relevant public reporting by USCIS on credible fear screenings and torture screenings conducted.

Denied access to U.S. asylum system

"We were saying many times that this [deportation] is illegal. But the response from the officers was, 'this is an order from Trump.'"

– Russian family deported without a fear screening to Russia where they fear political persecution

Under [U.S. law](#), any person in the United States or at a U.S. port of entry who expresses a fear of return or an intent to apply for asylum must be provided an opportunity to apply for asylum or at a minimum referred for a fear screening ("credible fear interview") with an asylum officer. Congress enacted these requirements to comply with U.S. obligations under the Refugee Convention and its Protocol, which [prohibit refoulement](#) (return) to potential persecution and [guarantee access to asylum procedures](#).

President Trump issued a [Proclamation](#) on January 20, 2025 that [unlawfully suspends](#) asylum processing at the southern border and denies asylum and other legal protections to people who enter the United States at the border. Since January, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has used this Proclamation to automatically deny access to asylum and expel or remove families and adults fleeing Afghanistan, Armenia, Ghana, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Uzbekistan and many other countries.

The government appears to have [stopped](#) publicly posting data on credible fear interviews as of mid-January, making it difficult to assess the full impact of this policy. However, asylum access at the border – both for people who cross between ports of entry and who present themselves at ports of entry – appears to be virtually non-existent. Legal service providers and private attorneys consistently report that they are aware of nearly *zero* credible fear

interviews that have been conducted for people arriving in the United States at the southern border since January 20th. The administration is, in limited instances, conducting sham torture screenings, as discussed below, but many asylum seekers are expelled or removed with no screening whatsoever.

Numerous accounts by asylum seekers about their repeated claims to DHS that they were coming to the United States to seek asylum and feared persecution if returned to their home countries contradict [DHS's assertion](#) that "not a single" person expelled or removed to Panama "asserted fear of returning to their home country at any point during processing or custody." Some asylum seekers reported to our researchers that officials asked them questions about which countries they traveled through to the United States and countries to which they could be removed. But officials refused to give them an opportunity to explain in detail why they fled and feared returning to their home countries. In some instances, officers told them they were being transported to other facilities where they would have asylum interviews, only to be taken to staging areas for their removal. Other people were informed that they had a court date, but were then expelled.

Many people removed without fear screenings have family members, including spouses and children, who are living in the United States and have applied for asylum, and remain indefinitely separated from their loved ones because of the administration's illegal actions. An asylum seeker who is separated from her two-year-old child and husband in the United States after being expelled without a fear screening shared: **"It's not a life to be so far from a child who is barely grown. I want to be with my family. I want us to be complete."** Family unity is a key principle in international law and U.S. immigration law. Refugees granted asylum may automatically extend asylum protections to their spouses and children *in the United States* if they were included in the asylum application.

Some asylum-seeking families and adults interviewed by Human Rights First and Refugees International reported that the U.S. government did not provide them with any documents after they were denied access to asylum, making it impossible to know on what basis they were expelled. Others received documents explicitly referencing the Proclamation while some received documents stating that they had been ordered removed and/or barred from reentering the United States (even though they had expressed fear of return to officers and had not received a screening). The administration's chaotic expulsions of people who come to the United States to seek asylum, with no fear screenings, access to counsel, or in some cases even documentation of what happened to them, violates constitutional, treaty, and statutory due process, refugee, and human rights obligations.

These are some of the stories of the families and individuals denied access to asylum and *refouled* to their home country or removed or expelled to a third country under the Trump administration:

- **U.S. officials denied a fear screening and removed to Russia a family fleeing [religious-](#) and political- based persecution in Russia for their work in a church that is being targeted by the government for political reasons.** The family fled Russia with their four children, including a four-month-old, after the church's pastor

was arrested and multiple church members were subjected to raids. When the family reached the United States in February 2025 and asked for asylum at a port of entry, U.S. immigration officials detained them. The family repeatedly stated to immigration officers in the multiple border facilities where they were detained that they were seeking asylum and presented evidence of their claim, which one officer made a copy of and another took the original. Officers refused to refer them for a fear screening and forced them to write their signatures on a tablet, yelling at them when they protested that they did not know what they were signing. When the father attempted to tell the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer that they could not be deported without a court hearing, **the officer yelled that these are President Trump's orders, that he didn't care about the law, that they were not giving anyone asylum, and that "Trump will defend me."**

- **U.S. officials denied access to asylum and expelled to Costa Rica the family of an Afghan man who had fled after being imprisoned and interrogated by the Taliban because he and his brother owned a company that provided construction equipment to the U.S. military in Afghanistan.** When the man entered the United States with his wife and two year old daughter in February 2025 and requested asylum, officers told them that, under the Trump administration, it was not possible to seek asylum. Just before they were sent to Costa Rica, an officer asked the family a few questions but did not permit them to explain in detail why they fled. The family was not told what, if any, kind of screening this was or who they were speaking to. Officials then expelled them to Costa Rica with paperwork indicating that they were subject to the Proclamation.
- **U.S. officials denied a fear screening to a Russian woman fleeing persecution due to her political activism and Armenian ethnicity. The officials transferred her to Costa Rica with her two children, separating her indefinitely from her husband and 13-year-old child who live in the United States with a pending asylum case.** She did not receive a fear screening even though she stated that she was seeking asylum as soon as she arrived at a port of entry. Later, officials pressured her to sign a document consenting to her deportation – including with threats of prolonged detention – at which point she again stated that she was asking for asylum. They responded that there was a new president and new rules, and there is no asylum. When she resisted boarding the plane to Costa Rica and demanded to know on what basis she was being deported, they falsely stated that there had been a court decision and told her she should just go quietly so as not to traumatize her children, who were crying.
- **An LGBTQ Russian asylum seeker fleeing persecution on the basis of his sexual orientation and political opinion, who had previously been beaten by the police and threatened with detention, entered the United States in February 2025 to seek asylum. The next day U.S. officials sent him to Panama without a fear screening** and with no opportunity to make a single phone call. He repeatedly told officers in English that he was seeking asylum, but had difficulty communicating because there was no interpretation provided. Officers did not respond to his

requests for asylum and sent him to Panama without telling him where he was being taken or giving him any paperwork.

- **A Georgian mother who fears harm for her political activism and was threatened by the person who murdered her brother fled to the United States with her son in February 2025, but U.S. officials sent them to Panama without a fear screening.** Officers told them they had been scheduled for a court date in June and would soon be released, required them to sign a tablet without showing them the documents they were signing, and then sent them to Panama without a hearing or interview, where they were detained in a hotel and decided to return home after everything they had suffered. Immigration officials told them: "America does not accept you at this time."
- **A Russian woman fled with her 17-year-old daughter and nephew after she was targeted by Russian authorities and had her businesses raided in retaliation for her opposition to Putin and the war in Ukraine, but U.S. officials separated her and her daughter from the nephew and expelled them to Costa Rica.** She repeatedly told officers that she was seeking asylum, but officers said that they would be deported. Officials gave her paperwork indicating that she was subject to the Proclamation suspending asylum access and sent her and her daughter to Costa Rica. They remain separated from her older daughter, who is living in the United States with a pending asylum case, and her nephew, who is in DHS custody and at risk of removal to Russia or a third country.
- **An Afghan woman shared that she had sought asylum in the United States in February 2025 with other young Afghan women fleeing gender-based harm,** including a woman fleeing a forced marriage, but U.S. officials sent them to Panama without a fear screening and without an opportunity to explain why they were seeking asylum. She reported that U.S. immigration officials told her to "Go back to your fucking country." She did not receive any paperwork from the United States.
- **U.S. officials denied access to asylum and transferred to Costa Rica an Armenian woman who was sexually assaulted and threatened with death** because of her husband's political opposition to the government's handling of the conflict over the Nagorno Karabakh region. Her husband is in the United States with a pending asylum application. When the woman arrived at a land border port of entry with her two children on January 22, 2025, an official told her it was "too late" to seek asylum and detained them. On the last day of their detention, she was asked about how she traveled to the United States and other countries where she had contacts. She insisted that her husband was in the United States and that she wanted to seek asylum, and refused to sign the paper regarding transport to Costa Rica pursuant to the Proclamation. Nonetheless, she and her children were transferred to Costa Rica without a statutorily required fear screening or opportunity to explain their asylum case and indefinitely separated from her husband.
- **U.S. officials expelled to Costa Rica an Afghan man with his wife and one-year-old daughter after they sought asylum because he feared political and religious**

persecution by the Taliban as an employee of the former Afghan government and a member of the Hazara minority. The family crossed the U.S. border together with relatives of his wife in early February after their CBP One appointments were canceled. U.S. officials handled their extended family in a chaotic, deceptive, and illegal manner, the one consistency being that they were denied access to asylum and unlawfully sent to other countries. U.S. officials transferred his wife's cousin to Panama and deported his wife's brother to Afghanistan. On their second day in detention, officials told the family that if they signed documents, which they were not shown, they would be released and have a scheduled hearing in immigration court. But after signing the documents, they remained detained for two more weeks and denied an opportunity to call the man's brother, who is living in the United States with a pending asylum case. The day before the family was flown to Costa Rica, officials gave them a document saying they were being transferred pursuant to the Proclamation. The man refused to sign the document because the officer did not translate it for him into Dari, though the officer indicated on the document that he had.

- **U.S. officials expelled a Russian man who fled his hometown near the Georgian border after he was threatened with prosecution for his protest against Russian expansionism in Abkhazia.** When he arrived at the U.S. border with his wife and 11-year-old son and said they wanted to seek asylum, border officials said that there was a new president, no more asylum, and deportation was their only option. Officials ignored his attempts to explain his fear of return to Russia and questions about where they would be sent. He and his family were flown to Costa Rica and, only after several weeks there, received papers stating that they had been removed from the United States, which had been given to Costa Rican officials by DHS.
- **A Russian man fled persecution by police for his exposure of fraud in the March 2024 Russian election and sought asylum with his wife and six-year-old son at a U.S. land border port of entry when their CBP One appointments were canceled, but was denied access to asylum and sent to Costa Rica.** A CBP Officer told him that there was a new president and that the United States did not give political asylum anymore. After around a week of detention, an officer told the family that if they did not withdraw their asylum application and sign papers accepting their deportation, they would continue to be jailed at the border facility for a long time. They refused, and several weeks later were flown to Costa Rica without any paperwork.

Abuses in U.S. government custody

"They [CBP officers] treated us like we weren't human beings."

– Russian family detained with four children, including a four-month-old baby

When asylum seekers come to the U.S. border to seek protection, the government often detains them in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody and later transfers them to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention, releases them to live in the United

States, or – increasingly – expels or removes them without any screening or opportunity to apply for asylum. While CBP facilities are intended for short-term processing (the government [requires](#) that people are not held longer than 72 hours), the government routinely jails people for longer than a month in CBP custody, including families and children.

There is a [long](#) and [extensively documented history](#) of abusive, dehumanizing, and [deadly](#) conditions in CBP custody, including widespread medical neglect, family separation, and physical and verbal abuse. While detained in CBP custody, people are routinely held *incommunicado* – untraceable by the public and unable to communicate with the outside world including family and attorneys – amounting to [enforced disappearances](#) under international law. In 2024, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances issued [General Allegations](#) to the U.S. government for its practice of disappearing migrants in CBP custody. Because CBP custody is a black box, access to counsel is virtually non-existent, as documented in a [report](#) by Human Rights First and National Immigration Law Center in December 2024. The situation has deteriorated drastically under the Trump administration, with legal service organizations and attorneys who previously represented or consulted with migrants in CBP custody reporting that in the past few months, they have received nearly zero calls from CBP custody.

Several asylum seekers who spoke to our researchers said that, in response to requests and complaints, CBP officers said that if they wanted different treatment they should go back to their countries and that the officers were operating under orders and immunity of the President. Officers threatened or punished them for protesting their mistreatment or refusing to agree to their deportation. A woman who was held in CBP custody sent to Panama reported that, when she asked to make a phone call, officers cursed at them and said **“If you want to communicate, go to your country.”** Officers also plugged their noses and told them that they **“all stink... go back to your country.”** A Russian family reported that when they complained to officers about violation of their rights, officers laughed at them and said they were **“under protection of Trump.”** Another Russian man said that when he complained about how cold and uncomfortable it was, the officer told him to “shut up” or they would use “special measures” to keep him quiet.

Asylum seekers who spoke with our researchers shared harrowing stories of the anguish, isolation, medical neglect, and physical and psychological mistreatment they suffered during their detention in CBP custody. Upon their arrival and during transfers to facilities and deportation flights, many were handcuffed or shackled at the waist, arms, and legs, including adults traveling with their minor children. One mother was not even allowed to hold her crying baby to comfort her because she was shackled, having to push the stroller back and forth. Adults reported that shackles and handcuffs left marks and in some cases bloody wounds on their bodies. Fathers described the shame of being shackled like criminals in front of their children. Some children over the age of ten were even handcuffed. Fathers also described the pain of not being able to communicate with their wives and children, who were detained separately. “When I tried to see them in the hall,” one man said, “the guard shouted to turn around.”

In the CBP facilities where they were detained for days, weeks, or over a month, people reported cold conditions, having to sleep in overcrowded hallways or small, freezing cold cells with bright lights and loud noises all day and night, inedible food and insufficient portions, and lack of regular access to showers and medical care. A Russian woman was denied care for a dental emergency and had to extract her own tooth. A man who had no access to his contact lenses could not see for 29 days of his detention. Officers confiscated people’s clothes and other belongings and gave them foil blankets to sleep with, leaving

people struggling to keep themselves and their children warm. People were often unable to sleep at night because officers would knock loudly, yell, force them to get up so the rooms could be cleaned, or wait until the middle of the night to give them an opportunity to shower. One father detained with around ten people in a cell in San Ysidro injured his head on a metal bench while trying to sleep because the cell was so crowded. A woman who was eight months pregnant slept on a metal bench for 10 days while detained.

While disappeared in CBP custody, families and adults suffered severe isolation and fear about what would happen with them, as they could not communicate with the outside world, were often separated from their children and spouses, frequently had no way to communicate with officers in their own language, and could not obtain information about their fate. Some asylum seekers reported to our researchers that they could not make a single call the entire time they were in CBP custody (under the [International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance](#), this a key component of enforced disappearance: “a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or...concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.”). Others were able to briefly call family members but could not make another phone call to try to reach an attorney. People reported being pressured to sign documents they did not understand, in some cases on a tablet where they could only see a signature line and not the underlying document.

These conditions are not humane for any human being and are especially traumatic for children. Our researchers interviewed families detained in CBP custody with children, toddlers, and babies, who were sick, hungry, cold, crying, and scared. Some children were detained separately from one or both parents for days or weeks at a time, having to sleep in crowded hallways or cells and merely told to drink cold water when their parents requested medication. Officers denied requests to provide warm water to mix with formula for babies. Children, including toddlers, went hungry in some cases because they could not eat the food or the portions were too small. Children lacked toys to play with and went over a month in detention barely seeing the sun. One mother shared that officers required them to walk to the dining area with their hands behind their backs, including her five-year-old son. She also shared that a family from Kyrgyzstan, who were detained for 35 days, were jailed in a separate cell with their three-year-old and six-year-old child with autism. **CBP officers wore headphones to block out the sound of the cries of the child with autism.**

Stories shared with our researchers about abuses in CBP custody during the first few months of the Trump administration include:

- A father living in the United States with a pending asylum case shared that while his wife and three children were detained in CBP custody in February, his wife was not permitted to make a phone call for more than two weeks. During this time, his four-year-old daughter was hospitalized multiple times and his eight-year-old son suffered a head injury in custody, but CBP officers still denied the mother's desperate requests to call the children's father. The father spent weeks frantically trying to obtain information about his family, describing it as **“weeks of hell”** and only was able to speak with his wife shortly before their transfer to Costa Rica, though they had not been informed that they were being sent to another country and could not warn the U.S.-based father of this. The day that the family was sent to Costa Rica, **the four-year-old was vomiting blood, but a healthcare provider for CBP advised the mother to simply give the child a cracker.** She was sent to Costa Rica without further medical care.

- An Afghan asylum seeker reported that, on the day that they were scheduled for transfer to Costa Rica, officers singled out his wife, a Muslim woman who wears a hijab, and forced her to clean the entire room where she had been detained with dozens of other people. When she later approached the officer and tearfully asked if she had been forced to clean the room because of her hijab, the officer told the family: **"If you don't calm down, we will take your baby and deport you without her."** Officers then separated the woman from her two-year-old daughter and husband, sedated her, and jailed her in a cell by herself while the girl cried for her mother. The father also reported that during the approximately 17 days that they were in CBP custody, he was detained separately from his wife and daughter and on some days could not see them at all, while on other days was allowed to see them for less than an hour.
- A Russian family detained with four children, including a four-month-old baby, shared that the officers **"treated us like we weren't human beings."** The father was separated from his wife and children in a CBP facility in Calexico, where they slept on mats on the floor in a cold and crowded hallway. Officers yelled and sang during the night when they were trying to sleep, which was **"emotional torture."** When DHS attempted to deport them on a military flight, the flight would not accept them with an infant. Rather than releasing them, DHS transferred the family to another CBP facility in San Ysidro where they were separated, detained in small cells, and endured even more harrowing conditions. Their 13-year-old son was separated from them and detained in a cell without his family for around five days. Officers confiscated the baby's formula and bottles, stating that the mother could only use the facility's supplies. The mother begged them to let her keep her own formula, which the baby was already accustomed to, given that abruptly switching could lead to stomach issues. Officers laughed at the mother as she cried, mocking that her child needed a "special formula." They eventually let her keep the formula but confiscated the bottles, resulting in the baby not eating for half a day because she was not used to the new bottles. The mother had to repeatedly beg officers for her baby's own bottle before they eventually allowed her to retrieve it. While detained in the facility, the mother also begged officers to lower the air conditioning because she had an infant, and reported that **"They then intentionally raised the AC. It was torture. It seemed like everything they were doing was to try to break us."**
- An asylum seeker from Uzbekistan expelled to Costa Rica with his wife and son reported that while in CBP custody, he and other migrants were mistreated by the guards as punishment for personal conversations and laughter. **Guards forced them to get on the floor on their knees and hold their handcuffed arms up in the air for 10 to 15 minutes, which was extremely painful.** He reflected: **"The way we were treated – no one even treats animals this way."** Throughout his detention in CBP custody and transfer to Costa Rica, he was detained separately from his wife and ten-year-old son and was not permitted to make a single phone call.
- A Russian woman detained with her five- and fifteen-year-old children was in CBP custody for nearly 32 days, during which **"our kids didn't see daylight almost at all"** and she was not allowed to call her husband in the United States for a 20-day stretch. She shared that **"every three days they took us...to shower. They gave us five minutes for the three of us under cold water."** When officers pressured her and other migrants to sign deportation documents and they refused, they punished them and their children by taking away some of their foil blankets (limiting it to one per person and throwing the remaining blankets in the trash) and abruptly ending access to cartoons for the children. Imprisoned in a room for weeks with no access

to the outside, toys, or crayons, the children made toys for themselves by rolling up torn pieces of foil blankets and socks into balls, but the officers confiscated those as well.

- **A Russian woman detained by CBP with her 17-year-old daughter reported that an officer violently pushed her from behind to remind her to hurry up and caused her to fall onto the person in front of her.** She also witnessed officers beating a man in the back with a rubber baton and violently shaking a woman who had lost consciousness. While in custody, her daughter was handcuffed along with other children over the age of ten. **“People need to know what is going on there,” she said.**
- **An Armenian woman detained by CBP for 29 days said it was hardest being separated from her 12-year-old son, who was detained in a cell with teenage boys,** while she was in a cell with other women and children, including her younger son. The children were allowed outside only twice for five minutes for over four weeks. Some guards laughed and made fun of them, slammed doors when they made requests, or screamed at the children if they were too loud. On the last day of their detention, they were taken for a few hours to a facility where guards had long guns and handled them roughly just before they were flown to Costa Rica. The Armenian mother was too afraid to speak: **“I was scared they would point the gun at me if I opened my mouth,” she said. “If people protested, the guards would drag them away for a time. They lined up the men in shackles like criminals in front of their children. My children got fear, pain and memories for the rest of their lives.”**
- Another Armenian woman said the guards refused to allow her to change clothes for the 26 days she was detained with her family in CBP custody. But she worried most about her son who was very hungry from lack of adequate food and developed a high fever for which he was denied medication. **“It got to the point where I worried he would die there,” she said.**

Unlawful transfers to third countries

“You are taken to a country which you don’t know about, and we have no idea what’s going to happen next.”

– A Russian asylum-seeking woman unlawfully expelled to Costa Rica

The Trump administration has negotiated undisclosed arrangements with countries to remove or expel – without reasonable notice or due process – asylum seekers, refugees, people granted withholding of removal because of likely persecution, and other migrants. Under these agreements, the administration has carried out escalating and illegal transfers of people to countries that they have no connection to, where they do not have legal status and face arbitrary detention, refoulement to persecution or torture, and other harms. These transfers violate U.S. law and international human rights obligations including the right to life, right to personal integrity, right to family unity, and rights to not be subjected to enforced disappearances, refoulement, arbitrary detention, and torture and cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment.

In February 2025, the Trump administration [removed and expelled nearly 500 asylum seekers and migrants](#) from mostly African and Asian countries, including Afghanistan, China, Ghana, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan, to Costa Rica and Panama in violation of U.S. law under agreements with those countries whose terms have not been made public. People who were forcibly transferred included pregnant women and families with young children. The asylum seekers and migrants were transferred to the custody of the Costa Rican and Panamanian governments, which immediately detained them.

There was no public record identifying the nearly 500 people sent to and received by these countries and arbitrarily deprived of their liberty in government custody, their whereabouts unknown. Costa Rica and Panama had reportedly agreed to be “[bridge](#)” countries for third country nationals sent by the United States who would return from there to their home countries with the help of the International Organization of Migration (IOM). When discussing the agreements publicly, [U.S.](#), [Panamanian](#), and [Costa Rican](#) officials referred to those transferred as irregular migrants who needed to be repatriated rather than recognizing them as asylum seekers with the right to seek protection. [Panamanian](#) and [Costa Rican](#) officials also stated that the U.S. government was paying for the stay and repatriation of the third country nationals.

To date, neither the U.S., the Panamanian, nor the Costa Rican governments have publicly confirmed the identities of who was sent there. Some asylum seekers sent to Costa Rica are still, months later, listed as detained in CBP custody according to the ICE detainee locator system, at the same time that the United States government has never confirmed their whereabouts in having been sent to a third country.

Our researchers spoke with people who arrived at the U.S. border to seek asylum, were denied a fear screening, did not have notice or an opportunity to express a fear of persecution and torture and apply for protection from removal to a third country, and were sent to Costa Rica and Panama under these agreements. Human Rights Watch has also extensively documented the stories of people sent to [Costa Rica](#) and [Panama](#), including denial of access to U.S. asylum, abuses in U.S. custody, and transfers to and detention in the third countries.

Transfers to and detention in Costa Rica and Panama further exacerbated the trauma of people who had suffered abuses and disappearances in CBP custody. A report by the Costa Rican [National Mechanism for Torture Prevention](#) noted the psychological effects of mistreatment in U.S. custody on the people unlawfully transferred to Costa Rica, requiring further investigation as a violation of “the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment..... as well as the Istanbul Protocol.” Some of the people whom our researchers spoke with – none of them nationals of either Costa Rica or Panama – were not told where they were going and/or did not have an opportunity to inform relatives or lawyers before they were transferred. When they arrived in Costa Rica and Panama, authorities immediately detained them and held their passports, limited their contact with journalists, lawyers, and non-governmental organizations, and transported them to remote facilities lacking sufficient accommodation, food, potable water, medical care, Wi-Fi, and interpreters. Migrants [unlawfully](#) detained in Panama were held [incommunicado](#) as Panamanian authorities confiscated their phones and blocked access to

lawyers. In both countries, they were isolated and lacked information about where they were, how long they were to be there, and what recourse they had.

People transferred under these agreements are at risk of chain refoulement – return via the third country to their home countries to face persecution – including due to the coercive nature of the conditions and rights violations in these third countries. These include arbitrary detention in remote locations, restricted communication, lack of due process and access to legal counsel, information, and interpretation, as well as inadequate medical care, which can pressure or force people to return to their home countries even where they fear persecution or torture. For instance, the Human Rights Ombudsman in Costa Rica expressed [concern](#) about inadequate support for children and people with disabilities upon arrival and while detained in Costa Rica. In their assessments, the Ombudsman raised concerns about the purported voluntariness of the returns to home countries of some of the families and adults in these desperate circumstances, including an eight-month-pregnant Armenian woman and two young children detained by CBP, expelled to Costa Rica without her older son who remained in DHS custody, and immediately detained despite her advanced pregnancy. Costa Rican human rights monitors also told our researchers that a Kyrgyz family inhumanely treated in prolonged CBP detention returned to Kyrgyzstan soon after arrival in Costa Rica due to lack of appropriate support for their autistic child at the detention center.

In both countries, several forcibly transferred people made [desperate escapes](#), and their whereabouts are unknown. Detention of people forcibly transferred to these countries has been challenged as unlawful in [Panamanian](#) and [Costa Rican](#) courts, urgently appealed to the [UN working group on arbitrary detention](#) (with respect to Costa Rica), and challenged at the [Inter-American Commission of Human Rights](#) (with respect to Panama) and before the UN committee that monitors the implementation of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (with respect to Costa Rica).

In response to this pressure, on March 7 the Panamanian government [released](#) the 112 people transferred from the United States who remained at the country's remote detention center and issued them 30-day "humanitarian permits," extendable up to 90 days, after which time they are required to leave. The permits made no mention of applying for asylum in Panama. Some people transferred from the United States attempted to apply for asylum but were summarily denied [despite the strength of their claims](#). On April 21, the Costa Rican government published a [resolution](#) providing the detained migrants with temporary legal status for three months with the possibility to extend another three months, the freedom to leave the CATEM migrant facility where they had been detained since February, and the ability to apply for asylum in the country – although they are not allowed to work and must pay a fee to obtain this temporary legal status.

Dozens of people remaining in Costa Rica and Panama are in limbo: unable to return to their home countries where they fear persecution and separated from their relatives in the United States. As an Armenian woman expelled to Costa Rica with her husband and son said: **"We have tough, heavy days in Costa Rica, just sitting in uncertainty. We can't go back to Armenia. My sister in the United States and the church in Los Angeles could help us if they let us seek asylum there."**

Stories shared with our researchers by families and adults removed or expelled to Costa Rica and Panama include:

- A man from Uzbekistan who was detained by CBP with his wife and son said that, on their last day in the United States, officials **“gave us a pen and paper and said choose [deportation to] Uzbekistan or Costa Rica? And we said neither. Two hours later, officials called us by last name and sent us to Costa Rica... They put me in shackles on the plane like a criminal....and only took them off right before landing.”** He shared that in Costa Rica, “people have illnesses, the weather is very hot, and there is no school for children who have gone without it for several months.”
- A woman from Ghana said: **“In Panama, it’s like a jail...they are treating us like animals and not like humans and they don’t let us know the way forward.”** She said that, at the San Vicente Center where they were detained, the guards confiscated their phones and refused to allow people to call their spouses in the United States. The bathrooms lacked doors for privacy and the water gave people rashes and infections. She said IOM told them it is better to go back to their countries, but they are scared to go back.
- **An Armenian woman who was expelled to Costa Rica with her two sons said her older 12-year-old son is traumatized from having been separated from her in CBP custody and now from his father in the United States.** In Costa Rica, he suffers from anxiety and has started bed wetting and having vision problems. Psychologists are available but do not speak Armenian, and there are no interpreters available for non-Spanish languages. IOM has provided them with some hygiene kits, but she has had to pay for medicine and glasses for her son.
- **A Russian asylum seeker removed to Costa Rica with his family said that it has been difficult to communicate with officials who only speak Spanish. He also said officials deceived them,** falsely claiming to be seeking alternative safe countries for their resettlement and that they would receive financial support and jobs if they applied for asylum in Costa Rica. “The Chinese people who chose to apply for refugee status were just thrown away and not supported,” he said.

In addition to unlawful transfers to Costa Rica and Panama, the Trump administration has continued to use enforced disappearances to expel people to other third countries, where they face onward refoulement, enforced disappearances, torture, denial of access to asylum, and other harms. Beginning in March 2025, the administration [disappeared](#) Venezuelans and Salvadorans to El Salvador where they are detained incommunicado, allegedly at the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) prison, known for its [human rights abuses, use of torture, and inhumane conditions](#). The Trump administration has also rapidly deported Nepali-speaking Hindu Bhutanese [resettled refugees](#) to Bhutan, which Bhutan [refused to accept](#), rendering them [stateless](#) and then stranded them at the Indian border with Nepal, where some were [jailed](#) by Nepali authorities. The administration has [unlawfully transferred](#) people granted withholding of removal – a protection against deportation to their home country because of risk of persecution or torture – to third countries without notice or an

opportunity to express fear or apply for protection from removal to that third country, thus putting them at risk of refoulement or chain refoulement.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is pursuing agreements with additional third countries to send asylum seekers and migrants. These include [Uzbekistan](#), which the United States seems to have paid to accept the returns of Kazak and Kyrgyz nationals “[expected to continue on to their home countries](#).” It is [reportedly negotiating](#) arrangements with additional countries mired in conflict, such as Ukraine and Sudan, and with records of severe human rights violations such as [Libya](#), along with likely diplomatic assurances of little worth from autocratic leaders of these countries that people sent by the United States will not be tortured there. It is also [negotiating further removals](#) of [non-Rwandan people](#) to Rwanda, where it recently sent a [resettled refugee](#) from Iraq.

The Trump administration also continues to send non-Mexicans (Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans, Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans) to Mexico, continuing years of returns, expulsions, and deportations of third country nationals to Mexico where they [face](#) enforced disappearances, persecution, onward refoulement, and other harms including at the hands of government agents.

Deficient torture screenings

While the administration is, in some instances, providing very limited screenings to asylum seekers about their fear of torture, the government routinely expels or removes people without such a screening, and even where provided, these torture screenings are a farce by design.

The government’s own [guidance](#) under the Proclamation requires that anyone who expresses fear of return should be referred for a torture screening, but asylum seekers who directly communicate with immigration officers regarding their fear of return are often ignored and removed, as discussed earlier in this report. A legal service provider reported that one asylum seeker requested a fear screening in writing and received a response from ICE that he was subject to the President’s January 21, 2025 Executive Order and “as such, claims or manifestations of fear do not alter your removal status,” which explicitly violates the government’s guidance. Some individuals receive a torture screening only when an attorney intervenes.

Even where provided, these deficient screenings do not comply with U.S. legal requirements. Under [U.S. law](#), people who express a fear of return must be referred for a credible fear interview, where an asylum officer determines if there is a “significant possibility” that they could establish eligibility for asylum. Torture screenings under this administration cannot be a substitute for this requirement. Even those who pass their torture screenings against all odds may *still* not be allowed to apply for protection, as DHS in some cases attempts to find another country to which to expel them.

Asylum seekers who failed these deficient torture screenings include:

- **Multiple asylum seekers who were beaten and detained by their country's governments**, according to attorneys who spoke with one of our researchers.
- **A lesbian woman from Russia who was persecuted for her sexual orientation and political opinion.** She was civilly prosecuted, interrogated, and threatened with imprisonment by the Russian police, according to Immigration Equality.

For years, the U.S. government has been [eviscerating protections](#) in the fear screening process, [raising the standard of proof](#), further [cutting off access to counsel](#) during the process, and otherwise taking steps to make fear screenings a sham. The torture screenings that the Trump administration is conducting are even more of a farce by design for numerous reasons, including:

- the stringent screening standard, "[more likely than not](#)" to be tortured is nonsensical for a preliminary screening and the same standard used in full assessments for Convention Against Torture protection in immigration court hearings, after people have had months or years to gather evidence, find an attorney, and prepare;
- the government [does not recognize](#) a right to consultation or counsel for these screenings and has refused to allow some attorneys to participate in the screenings;
- there is no review available for negative decisions, in contrast to immigration court review of negative credible fear decisions; and
- asylum seekers and attorneys are often not provided with any documentation regarding the screening or the outcome, and in some cases it is impossible to confirm whether a screening has even taken place: attorneys have reported that USCIS has denied conducting a screening when in fact one has occurred.

Methodology

This report is based on research conducted in March, April and early May by Refugees International and Human Rights First. Refugees International and Human Rights First researchers conducted remote interviews with 19 individuals that the U.S. government expelled or removed to their home countries or to Panama or Costa Rica, as well as with the husband of another expelled family living in the United States. These interviews were conducted in English and, with the help of interpreters, in Arabic, Armenian, Dari, Russian, and Spanish. In late March, Refugees International traveled to Costa Rica to speak to human rights monitors and civil society groups. Researchers also spoke with legal service providers in the United States.

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About the Organizations

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, holding perpetrators of abuse accountable, and defending universal rights. Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

Refugees International, a nonprofit organization based in Washington D.C., advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people. Working with partners around the world, Refugees International investigates the challenges displaced people face, develops policy solutions, mobilizes action, and holds the powerful to account. Refugees International believes that people experiencing displacement must be at the center of the movement to advance solutions and is dedicated to expanding the space for refugee leadership. To ensure the independence and credibility of its work and to advance accountability, Refugees International does not accept government or UN funding.