# Venezuelan migrants face enforced disappearances and fear under US deportation policies



On the morning of 13 March this year, Venezuelan migrant Neiyerver Rengel was seized outside his apartment in Irving, Texas, by three federal agents who declared he had “charges to answer” and took him into custody. The 27-year-old’s disappearance swiftly turned into a distressing mystery for his family and girlfriend, as they were given no clear information about his whereabouts or status. Rengel was eventually identified among at least 252 Venezuelans deported to El Salvador, where they were incarcerated in a detention centre notorious for harsh conditions and allegations of torture.

Rengel’s detention echoes the practice of enforced disappearances characteristic of Latin American dictatorships in the 20th century, where regime opponents were abducted without legal procedures and often never seen again. However, this incident took place in the United States under the administration of Donald Trump, where the so-called “forced disappearance” of Venezuelan migrants has alarmed human rights advocates and immigrant communities.

Juanita Goebertus, Human Rights Watch’s Americas director, told The Guardian, “Under international law, when someone is detained and there’s no account of where the person is, it amounts to enforced disappearances – and this is exactly what has happened.” She stressed the gravity of these disappearances within the legal context.

After his arrest in March, for five weeks Rengel’s family was left without any clear information. His brother, Nedizon León Rengel, recounted futile efforts to locate him through immigration detention centres, where officials responded ambiguously, suggesting he had been deported but never specifying to where. It was only on 23 April, through the media, that they learned of Rengel’s transfer to El Salvador’s “terrorism confinement” prison. The deportees are accused of association with the Tren de Aragua (TdA), a Venezuelan gang designated by the Trump administration as a foreign terrorist organisation.

“We had to find out through the news. It was devastating. But the worst part was having to tell my mum,” Nedizon said, highlighting the emotional toll of the situation. He also expressed a sense of betrayal, contrasting the US as a land of opportunity with the nightmare experience his family now faced. “Human rights aren’t even being respected any more – not even the right to make a phone call, which is guaranteed to anyone who is detained.”

Another Venezuelan migrant, Ricardo Prada Vásquez, 33, was similarly detained in Detroit in January and disappeared for five weeks after being deported. Despite family denials of his alleged gang affiliation, his whereabouts remained unknown until authorities acknowledged his incarceration in El Salvador following media exposure. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assistant secretary Tricia McLaughlin defended the deportation on social media, labelling Prada a “public safety threat.”

Ricardo’s brother, Hugo Prada, described the emotional fatigue and disbelief felt by families. He shared, “It’s mentally exhausting to be constantly thinking about how he is and what he’s going through.” He also remarked on the profound shock of seeing people vanish into detention without transparency. “It’s unbelievable that they just grabbed them and sent them to a concentration camp for them to die, just like Hitler did with the Jews,” Hugo said, reflecting the intense fear within the community.

Nelson Suárez, whose brother Arturo Suárez is among those jailed in El Salvador, noted the governmental tactics bore a striking resemblance to those employed by Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, involving secretive detentions and disappearances. Arturo Suárez, a musician with no criminal background, was among those detained without public explanation or due process.

The wave of detentions and disappearances has sown fear within the Venezuelan diaspora in the US, which has grown significantly as many flee Venezuela’s ongoing economic and political crises. Adelys Ferro, head of the Venezuelan American Caucus advocacy group, commented on the pervasive atmosphere of terror. “The community lives in uncertainty and in terror,” Ferro said. “People are petrified. They are thinking: ‘What if I am next? What if they stop me? What is going to happen?’ Even people with green cards are terrified.”

The DHS’s refusal to disclose official records or confirm charges against those deported to El Salvador has left families in anguish. According to The Guardian, families remain uninformed about the conditions in which their loved ones are held, the nature of any legal proceedings, or potential sentences they might face.

Rengel’s girlfriend, Richely Alejandra Uzcátegui Gutiérrez, remains unsettled despite the DHS’s admission that he is in El Salvador. She noted, “To me, he’s still missing. This doesn’t give me peace of mind... There’s no record, no photo, no phone call. I insist – he’s still missing.”

The developments have underscored the distressing experiences faced by Venezuelan migrants caught in stringent US immigration enforcement policies targeting those accused of gang affiliations. The deportations to El Salvador and the consequent lack of transparency have raised profound concerns about due process, human rights, and the treatment of immigrants under the current administration. Meanwhile, families back in Venezuela continue to endure the anguish of uncertainty over the fate of their loved ones, some of whom migrated to the US seeking safety and a better life.

Sandra Luz Rengel, Neiyerver’s mother, recalled advising him against travelling to the US, a plea he did not heed. Reflecting on the ordeal, she said, “Not knowing anything about him is outrageous. And there’s nothing I can do.”

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

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* <https://elpais.com/us/migracion/2025-04-24/ricardo-prada-el-venezolano-desaparecido-en-custodia-de-ice-reaparece-en-la-carcel-de-el-salvador-esto-es-de-una-gran-crueldad.html> - This article details the case of Ricardo Prada Vásquez, a Venezuelan migrant who was detained in Detroit and deported to El Salvador, highlighting the lack of transparency and the harsh conditions of the Terrorism Confinement Center.
* <https://www.ft.com/content/586c0e6a-1568-4b94-b369-a38b54a9bf5e> - This podcast episode discusses El Salvador's aggressive anti-gang strategy under President Nayib Bukele, including the mass incarceration of individuals in the Terrorism Confinement Center, raising serious human rights concerns.
* <https://apnews.com/article/973455c687c436d33b3268799d8a7753> - This article reports on the Department of Homeland Security's response to court-barred deportations, highlighting the legal and procedural challenges in enforcing immigration policies under judicial constraints.
* <https://elpais.com/us/migracion/2025-04-25/la-deportacion-a-el-salvador-frustrada-por-la-justicia-que-salvo-a-unos-60-venezolanos-del-cecot.html> - This piece covers the legal intervention that halted the deportation of approximately 60 Venezuelans to the Terrorism Confinement Center, emphasizing the lack of due process and the precarious conditions in Salvadoran detention centers.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/29/venezuelan-detained-families-el-salvador-trump-dictatorship> - Please view link - unable to able to access data