

El Salvador Exchanges U.S. Deportees for Americans Detained in Venezuela

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A landmark prisoner swap took place on July 18, 2025, involving the governments of El Salvador, Venezuela, and the United States. Under the agreement, more than 250 Venezuelan nationals who had been deported from the U.S. and detained at El Salvador's high-security Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) were flown back to Venezuela in exchange

for the release of ten U.S. citizens and permanent residents held in Venezuelan custody.

El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele confirmed that the repatriated group included all Venezuelans previously held at CECOT. According to Bukele, the swap also facilitated the release of political prisoners in Venezuela and secured freedom for U.S. detainees considered to have been held "wrongfully." U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio thanked Bukele, stating that the administration had acted to bring home Americans detained abroad.

The Venezuelan detainees had been deported from the United States under the controversial use of the Alien Enemies Act, invoked in March 2025 by the then-Trump administration. Most lacked criminal records and were identified based in part on tattoos linked to the Tren de Aragua gang, a designation widely disputed by rights advocates. The CECOT facility drew international scrutiny for alleged human rights abuses, including overcrowded conditions, limited legal access, and reports of beatings and torture.

Among the Americans freed were dual citizen Lucas Hunter and former Navy SEAL Wilbert Joseph Castañeda, both described by their families as wrongfully detained and relieved to be returning home. Their safe return was hailed as a diplomatic accomplishment by family members and U.S. officials alike.

The exchange serves as a rare moment of agreement between adversarial governments. It reflects a diplomatic initiative championed by Bukele, who publicly proposed the swap months earlier, and by U.S. officials working to secure the detainees' release. Venezuelan leaders

framed the return of their citizens as a humanitarian victory, while calling attention to similar releases of political prisoners within their penal system.

Critics underscore the ethical and legal controversies surrounding the process, from the legality of the deportations and conditions at CECOT to the lack of due process for those affected. Still, the operation is being viewed as a strategic win for all parties involved, particularly the United States, which secured the safe return of its citizens without further escalation.