

El Salvador Prison Claims from Venezuelan Deportee

August 7, 2025

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A Venezuelan asylum seeker has alleged brutal treatment inside El Salvador's most secure prison after being unexpectedly transferred there from U.S. custody. The case raises serious questions about the Biden administration's immigration enforcement and deportation process.

Frengel Reyes, 25, had been living legally in Tampa, Florida, with his wife and her son since entering the United States in 2023. On February 4, during a routine immigration appointment, Reyes was detained and later shuffled through detention centres in Florida, Georgia, and Texas.

He was accused of having ties to Tren de Aragua, a violent Venezuelan gang that the U.S. State Department recently designated as a terrorist organisation. According to court filings, Reyes was among more than 200 Venezuelans expedited for deportation under the Alien Enemies Act, a rarely used statute from 1798.

His wife, Liyanara Sanchez, strongly disputes the allegations. “They mixed up names, got the gender wrong, even used the wrong ID number,” she told reporters. “It was so sloppy the lawyers couldn’t believe it.”

Reyes is expected to be sent back to Venezuela. Instead, he was flown to El Salvador. “When I saw signs for San Salvador, I knew something wasn’t right,” he said in a recent interview.

Upon arrival, Reyes claims he and other detainees were shackled and forcibly dragged from the plane. “If someone fell, they were kicked. I was punched in the ribs. Others were hit in the face,” he said.

At El Salvador’s Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT), known as one of the most high-security prisons in the world, Reyes described severe physical and psychological abuse. “They called it the cemetery for the living,” he said.

He recalled inmates sleeping on bare metal surfaces with no mattresses or blankets. Those who refused to eat or disobeyed orders were beaten. “We were woken at 3 a.m. and made to kneel for hours. They told us we were scum who’d never leave.”

Human Rights Watch has confirmed similar complaints from other detainees. Juanita Goebertus, Americas Director for the organisation, said in a statement that an investigative report is forthcoming. “The mistreatment we’re documenting violates international human rights standards,” she noted.

Past reports have linked El Salvador’s prison system to medical neglect, suicides, and documented cases of torture.

After four months in CECOT, Reyes was returned to Venezuela under a prisoner exchange between the U.S. and Venezuelan governments. He is now recovering at home in Zulia, still dealing with chronic pain and sleep problems.

“I never lost hope,” he said. “My wife never gave up on me.”

Sanchez remains in Tampa with her son and continues to pursue her asylum claim. She works multiple jobs, including housecleaning and driving for Uber. “We came to the U.S. to start a life together,” she said. “But now we’re living apart, and nothing feels settled.”

According to the CATO Institute, dozens of those deported under similar circumstances had no criminal records and entered the U.S. legally. Reyes’ experience adds to growing concerns over the process and accuracy of immigration enforcement.

In a statement, a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson said: “Many illegal aliens labeled as ‘non-criminals’ by the media are, in fact, national security risks. They simply lack a U.S. criminal record.”

The case illustrates how immigration enforcement, under both past and current administrations, continues to operate under outdated laws and questionable discretion. While officials stress the need to dismantle criminal networks, critics point to the lack of transparency and due process in cases like Reyes’.

As U.S. immigration policy remains under scrutiny, this case is likely to draw attention from lawmakers, human rights advocates, and the broader public.