

US military deportation flight likely cost more than first class

Phil Stewart : 5-6 minutes : 1/30/2025

Item 1 of 2 U.S. Customs and Border Protection security agents guide a group of detained migrants to board a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III aircraft for a removal flight at Fort Bliss, Texas, U.S. January 23, 2025. Dept. of Defense/U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas J. De La Pena/Handout via REUTERS/File Photo

[1/2]U.S. Customs and Border Protection security agents guide a group of detained migrants to board a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III aircraft for a removal flight at Fort Bliss, Texas, U.S. January 23, 2025. Dept. of Defense/U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas J. De La Pena/Handout via... [Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab](#) Read more

- Summary
- Monday's deportation flight likely cost at least \$4,675 per migrant
- Trump vows continued use of military aircraft for deportations
- C-17 flights more expensive than ICE charter alternatives

WASHINGTON, Jan 30 (Reuters) - U.S. President [Donald Trump's](#) military deportation flight to Guatemala on Monday likely cost at least \$4,675 per migrant, according to data provided by U.S. and Guatemalan officials.

That is more than five times the \$853 cost of a one-way first class ticket on American Airlines from El Paso, Texas, the departure point for the flight, according to a review of publicly available airfares.

It is also significantly higher than the cost of a commercial charter flight by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Trump launched the military deportation flights last week as part of his national [emergency declaration on immigration](#), so far sending six planeloads of migrants on flights to Latin America.

Only four have landed, [all of them in Guatemala](#), after Colombia refused to let two U.S. C-17 cargo aircraft land and instead sent [its own planes](#) to collect migrants following a standoff with Trump.

A U.S. official, speaking to Reuters on condition of anonymity, estimated the cost to operate a C-17 military transport aircraft is \$28,500 per hour. The flight back and forth to Guatemala, not including time on the ground or any operations to prepare the flight for takeoff, took about 10-1/2 hours in the air to complete, the official said.

A Guatemalan official told Reuters the military transport plane landed on Monday with 64 people on board.

The Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Trump, speaking at his Doral golf club to Republican lawmakers on Monday, vowed his unprecedented use of military aircraft for deportations would continue and any countries that refuse will "pay a high economic price."

"For the first time in history, we are locating and loading illegal aliens into military aircraft and flying them back to the places from which they came," Trump said to applause.

"We're respected again, after years of laughing at us like we're stupid people."

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt posted images last week of migrants boarding up the back ramp of a hulking C-17, announcing, "President Trump is sending a strong and clear message to the entire world: if you illegally enter the United States of America, you will face severe consequences."

HIGH PRICE TAG

The C-17 price tag is substantially higher than the alternative: commercial aircraft chartered by ICE.

Costs for the charter ICE flights vary. According to information posted on ICE's website in 2021, the cost for "Ice Air" flights is \$8,577 per flight hour. But acting ICE Director Tae Johnson told lawmakers during an April 2023 budget hearing that deportation flights cost \$17,000 per flight hour for 135 deportees and typically lasted five hours.

The higher figure given by Johnson would translate to a cost of \$630 per person, assuming the charter company, and not ICE, pays the cost of the return flight. A former ICE official said the cost had risen slightly since 2023.

ICE says it transports detainees on chartered Boeing 737 or McDonnell Douglas MD-80 series aircraft.

The Pentagon said last week the U.S. military would provide flights for the deportations of more than 5,000 immigrants held by U.S. authorities in El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, California.

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Phil Stewart has reported from more than 60 countries, including Afghanistan, Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, China and South Sudan. An award-winning Washington-based national security reporter, Phil has appeared on NPR, PBS NewsHour, Fox News and other programs and moderated national security events, including at the Reagan National Defense Forum and the German Marshall Fund. He is a recipient of the Edwin M. Hood Award for Diplomatic Correspondence and the Joe Galloway Award.