

Trump Admin Is Misleading Public About Venezuelans at Guantánamo, Attorneys Say

Mike Ludwig : 11-14 minutes : 2/14/2025

After Kristi Noem, the newly confirmed secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), traveled to Guantánamo Bay earlier this week, she [told CNN](#) the Venezuelan migrants being transferred to the notorious U.S. naval base and military prison are “the worst of the worst that we’ve pulled off our streets.”

Immigration attorneys say the facts on the ground do not support Noem’s official narrative about what’s going on at Guantánamo Bay, where President Donald Trump has ordered the construction of a tent city in order to detain up to [30,000 migrants, regardless of the site’s capacity](#), including asylum seekers fleeing violence and poverty. For civil rights groups, the transfer is only the latest in a series of legally dubious efforts by the federal government to dodge constitutional requirements by incarcerating people at the notorious offshore facility.

Among the first 100 or so people reportedly transferred from immigration jails on the mainland to Guantánamo Bay this week are migrants that U.S. officials themselves call “low risk,” with no serious criminal record, [according](#) to internal records uncovered by [CBS News](#). A coalition of civil rights groups and immigration attorneys say the Trump administration has provided virtually no information about the people newly detained at the offshore military base and filed [a lawsuit](#) on Wednesday seeking to communicate with them and provide legal advice.

Zoe Bowman, a supervising attorney at Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, a legal provider named as a plaintiff in the lawsuit, said it appears that most of the people were detained at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities in New Mexico after surrendering or applying for asylum at the border. So far attorneys have been unable to contact them for legal support, Bowman said.

“I think this is a false narrative being put out by the Trump administration and by the secretary of DHS, that they are picking ‘murderers’ up like off of the streets and bringing them to Guantánamo,” Bowman said in an interview. “But what we are seeing on the ground is that it’s people who have been in ICE custody for a very long time, either at the Otero County Detention Center or the ICE processing center in El Paso.”

Dozens of the migrants held at Guantánamo are Venezuelan citizens, initial reporting has found. Venezuela refused to accept U.S. deportation flights for much of the past year due to diplomatic tensions. Venezuelan authorities finally agreed this week to send [two airplanes](#) to the U.S. to repatriate about 190 migrants, but tens of thousands have fled the country due to poverty and political unrest [intensified by U.S. sanctions](#).

Civil rights attorneys scored a small victory on Monday when a federal judge [blocked](#) the transfer of three Venezuelan migrants from the Otero County Detention Center in New Mexico to Guantánamo Bay. Attorneys representing the three asylum seekers filed a writ of habeas corpus in September to challenge their indefinite detention at the privately run immigration jail, which has [a well-documented history of systemic human rights abuses](#), such as medical neglect and the retaliatory use of solitary confinement.

As reports emerged of other migrants being transferred to Guantánamo Bay making headlines, the federal judge issued an [emergency order](#) preemptively blocking the transfer of the three asylum seekers to the offshore naval base in order to preserve the court’s jurisdiction over the original habeas corpus case. Attorneys for the three men say there is no legal basis for their continued incarceration and are asking the court to release them under supervision while they await deportation.

Rebecca Sheff, senior staff attorney at ACLU of New Mexico, said the transfers to Guantánamo Bay are part of a “deliberate scheme to use New Mexico and El Paso as testing sites for dehumanizing and dangerous immigration policies.” El Paso is home to ICE facilities and a major border crossing, but the number of migrants arriving there has [plummeted](#) over the past year.

“Transferring immigrants from El Paso and Otero County to Guantánamo is not just an attack on their legal rights — it is part of a broader, calculated effort to advance Trump’s anti-immigrant propaganda by portraying immigrants as threats rather than human beings seeking safety,” Sheff said in an email to *Truthout*. “This

separates immigrants from their families and attorneys, isolating them in a remote military prison thousands of miles away.”

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for additional information about the people transferred to Guantánamo Bay. On February 5, the Department of Defense [released a statement](#) announcing the arrival of “10 high-threat illegal aliens,” dehumanizing language that seems to place Venezuela on another planet. Noem followed up with a social media [post](#) about “criminal alien murderers, rapists, child predators and gangsters.”

So far, the government has released no evidence to the media that the people transferred to Guantánamo Bay are guilty of such alleged crimes. Trump, his allies and the right-wing media have obsessed over Tren de Aragua, a powerful Venezuelan gang active in the U.S. that has become a major justification for the president’s mass deportation plan. In order to promote the false narrative that a mass roundup of immigrants is necessary for public safety, immigration attorneys say U.S. authorities are suggesting asylum seekers are associated with the gang.

Samah Sisay, an attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), said Tren de Aragua is operating in the U.S. and other countries, but the media narratives suggesting a connection between the gang and asylum seekers fleeing violence and poverty are “problematic and overblown.” Sisay and CCR represent the three Venezuelan men at Otero County Detention Center who were blocked from transfer to Guantánamo Bay.

“There is a long history of ICE and [Border Patrol] falsely accusing people of having association with gangs,” Sisay said in an interview. “For instance, in our habeas corpus petition, two of our clients were accused of being members of Tren de Aragua; one for a tattoo, and this tattoo has nothing to do with gang, and there are no other allegations.”

Sisay said the other client was falsely accused of admitting to being a member of the gang during interviews with authorities at the border. The man says he never made such a confession. Accusing immigrants of gang membership is a well-worn tactic used to keep people locked up in immigration jails while they pursue asylum claims, Sisay said, and for generating anti-immigrant propaganda in the media.

“It’s a fearmongering tactic, and it’s also a tactic to keep people detained because they can argue they are dangerous,” Sisay said.

Luis Alberto Castillo, a young father from Venezuela, is among the men sent to Guantánamo Bay this week. In an interview from her home in Columbia with [The New York Times](#), Castillo’s sister said he was wrongly singled out and accused of gang membership for sporting a tattoo of an iconic Michael Jordan image. Castillo plays basketball and is a fan of the famous Chicago Bulls star, not a gang member, his sister said.

The Trump administration recently ordered that Tren de Aragua be designated as an foreign terrorist organization and revoked deportation protections known as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for [350,000 Venezuelans](#). Sisay said the moves serve Trump’s racist narrative about immigrants threatening public safety while giving officials room to make excuses for human rights abuses that could occur as the president’s plan to deport tens of thousands of people moves forward.

“It all points to this strange dangerousness façade to really excuse any bad behavior or illegal actions ... they are trying to get ahead of it,” Sisay said.

With the officials preparing to detain entire families in massive immigration detention facilities and threatening to separate families with deportation orders, the most controversial days of Trump’s immigration crackdown are likely still to come. Sisay and Bowman said this explains why Noem travelled to Guantanamo Bay this week; Noem posted photos of migrants being escorted by the military to a remote facility that holds prisoners of the so-called “war on terror” launched by President George W. Bush.

Creating an anti-immigrant narrative in the media comes at a steep human cost. Venezuelans who supported Trump [reportedly feel betrayed](#) and worry that they or their family members will be deported now that TPS is revoked. Could they eventually end up in a tent city at Guantánamo Bay as well? The men who have already been transferred to the naval base and paraded in front of cameras are completely disconnected from attorneys and support systems, causing heavy anxiety among family members who are all too aware of Guantánamo Bay’s [long history of indefinite detention and torture](#).

“Families haven’t even gotten phone calls from their loved ones, much less legal calls,” Bowman said. “I think they are very intentionally using a place that is synonymous with torture and saying they want to detain people

there at scale. It's not cost efficient, there are flights to Venezuela right now, so I can't see what the purpose of it could possibly be besides to invoke torture and terror."

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