

Men freed from El Salvador mega-prison endured 'state-sanctioned torture', lawyers say
Venezuelans back home under Maduro-Trump deal tell of isolation, beatings and dirty water –
'a living nightmare'

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Venezuelans that the Trump administration expelled to El Salvador's most notorious megaprison endured "state-sanctioned torture", lawyers for some of the men have said, as more stories emerge about the horrors they faced during capacity.

When José Manuel Ramos Bastidas – one of 252 Venezuelan men that the US sent to El Salvador's most notorious mega-prison – finally made it back home to El Tocuyo on Tuesday, the first thing he did was stretch his arms around his family.

His wife, son and mother were wearing the bright blue shirts they had printed with a photo of him, posed in a yellow and black moto jacket and camo-print jeans. It was the first time they had hugged him since he left Venezuela last year. And it was the first time they could be sure – truly sure – that he was alive and well since he disappeared into the Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo (Cecot) in March.

"We have been waiting for this moment for months, and I feel like I can finally breathe," said Roynerliz Rodríguez, Ramos Bastidas's partner. "These last months have been a living nightmare, not knowing anything about José Manuel and only imagining what he must be suffering. I am happy he is free from Cecot, but I also know that we will never be free of the shadow of this experience. There must be justice for all those who suffered this torture."

The Venezuelan deportees were repatriated last week following a deal between the US and Venezuelan governments. Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan president, negotiated a prisoner swap that released 10 American citizens in his custody and dozens of Venezuelan political prisoners in exchange for the release of his citizens from Cecot.

This week, after undergoing medical and background checks, they are finally reuniting with their families. Their **testimonies** of what they experienced inside Cecot are providing the first, most detailed pictures of the conditions inside Cecot, a mega-prison that human rights groups say is designed to disappear people.

Ramos Bastidas and other US deportees were told that they were condemned to spend 30 to 90 years in Cecot unless the US president ordered otherwise, he told his lawyers. They were shot with rubber bullets on repeated occasions – including on Friday, during their last day of detention.

In interviews with the media and in testimony provided to their lawyers, other detainees described lengthy beatings and humiliation by guards. After some detainees tried to break the locks on their cell, prisoners were beaten for six consecutive days, the [Atlantic reports](#). Male guards reportedly brought in female colleagues, who beat the naked prisoners and recorded videos.

Edicson David Quintero Chacón, a US deportee, said that he was placed in isolation for stretches of time, during which he thought he would die, his lawyer told the Guardian. Quintero Chacón, who has scars from daily beatings, also said that he and other inmates were only provided soap and an opportunity to bathe on days when visitors were touring the prison – forcing them to choose between hygiene and public humiliation.

Food was limited, and the drinking water was dirty, Quintero Chacón and other detainees have said. Lights were on all night, so detainees could never fully rest. “And the guards would also come in at night and beat them at night,” said his lawyer Stephanie M Alvarez-Jones, the south-east regional attorney at the National Immigration Project.

In a filing, Quintero Chacón’s legal team wrote: “He will likely carry the psychological impact of this torture his whole life. The courts must never look away when those who wield the power of the US government, at the highest levels, engage in such state-sanctioned violence.”

Ramos Bastidas has never been convicted of any crimes in the US (or in any country). In fact, he had never really set foot in the US as a free man.

In El Tocuyo, in the Venezuelan state of Lara, and had been working since he was a teenager to support his family. Last year, he decided to leave his country – which has yet to recover from an economic collapse – to seek better income, so he could pay for medical care for his infant with severe asthma.

In March 2024, he arrived at the US-Mexico border and presented himself at a port of entry. He made an appointment using the now-defunct CBP One phone application to apply for asylum – but immigration officials and a judge determined that he did not qualify.

But Customs and Border Protection agents had flagged Ramos Bastidas as a possible member of the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua, based on an unsubstantiated report from Panamanian officials and his tattoos. So they transferred him to a detention facility, where he was to remain until he could be deported.

Despite agreeing to return to Venezuela, he remained for months in detention. “I think what is particularly enraging for José is that he had accepted his deportation,” said Alvarez-Jones. “He

was asking for his deportation for a long time, and he just wanted to go back home.” In December, Venezuela wasn’t accepting deportees – so Ramos Bastidas asked if he could be released and make his own way home. A month later, Donald Trump was sworn in as president. Everything changed. Ramos Bastidas began to see other Venezuelans were being sent to the military base in Guantánamo Bay in Cuba – and he feared the same would happen to him. On 14 March, he shared with his family that maybe he would be able to come back to Venezuela after all, after officials began prepping him for deportation.

The next day, he was flown to Cecot.

“They could have deported him to Venezuela,” Alvarez-Jones. “Instead, the US government made a determination to send him to be tortured in Cecot.”