



POLITICS

While signing Laken Riley Act, Trump says he'll send 'worst criminal aliens' to Guantanamo

1 of 9 | President Donald Trump says he's directing the opening of a detention center at Guantanamo Bay to hold up to 30,000 immigrants who are living illegally in the United States.



BY [WILL WEISERT](#)

Share

► Follow live updates on [President Donald Trump's return to Washington](#)

WASHINGTON (AP) — President [Donald Trump](#) on Wednesday signed the [Laken Riley Act](#) into law, giving federal authorities broader power to deport immigrants in the U.S. illegally who have been accused of crimes. He also announced at the ceremony that his administration planned to send the "worst criminal aliens" to a detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The bipartisan act, the first piece of legislation approved during Trump's second term, was named for Riley, a 22-year-old Georgia nursing student who was slain last year by a Venezuelan man in the U.S. illegally.

"She was a light of warmth and kindness," Trump said during a ceremony that included Riley's parents and sister. "It's a tremendous tribute to your daughter what's taking place today, that's all I can say. It's so sad we have to be doing it."

Trump has promised to drastically increase deportations, but he also said at the signing that some of the people being sent back to their home countries couldn't be counted on to stay there.

"Some of them are so bad that we don't even trust the countries to hold them because we don't want them coming back, so we're gonna send 'em out to Guantanamo," Trump said. He said that he'd direct federal officials to get facilities in Cuba ready to receive immigrant criminals.

RELATED COVERAGE

In Kentucky bourbon country, the newest trade war feels like a hangover that won't go away



Tariff threats take aim at fentanyl trafficking. Here's how the drug reaches the US



Stocks from automakers to retailers feel pressure from tariff threats



"We have 30,000 beds in Guantanamo to detain the worst criminal aliens threatening the American people," the president said.

The White House announced a short time later that Trump had signed a presidential memorandum on Guantanamo. Migrant rights groups quickly expressed dismay.

"Guantanamo Bay's abusive history speaks for itself and in no uncertain terms will put people's physical and mental health in jeopardy," Stacy Suh, program director of Detention Watch Network, said in a statement.

Trump said the move would double U.S. detention lockup capacities, and Guantanamo is "a tough place to get out of."

The Guantanamo facility could hold "dangerous criminals" and people who are "hard to deport," said a Trump administration official speaking on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said his department can set up a detention center "very rapidly" and called Guantanamo Bay "a perfect spot."

"We don't want illegal criminals in the United States, not a minute longer than they have to be," he said Wednesday evening on Fox News' "Jesse Watters Primetime." "Move them off to Guantanamo Bay, where they can be safely maintained until they are deported to their final location, their country of origin."

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said the administration would seek funding via spending bills Congress will eventually consider.

The U.S. military base has been used to house detainees from the U.S. war on terrorism for years. But authorities have also detained migrants at sea at a facility known as the Migrant Operations Center on Guantanamo, a site the U.S. has long leased from the Cuban government. Many of those housed there have been migrants from Haiti and Cuba.

The U.S. has leased Guantanamo land from Cuba for more than a century. Cuba opposes the lease and typically rejects the nominal U.S. rent payments. Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel said Trump wanting to ship immigrants to the island is "an act of brutality."

"The U.S. government's decision to imprison migrants at the Guantanamo Naval Base, in an enclave where it created torture and indefinite detention centers, shows contempt for the human condition and international law," Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez wrote in a post on X.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2008 that enemy combatants in the war on terror held without charge at the military prison at Guantanamo had the right to challenge their detention in federal court. But the justices did not decide whether the president had the authority to detain people at all.

Before Trump took office, the Democratic administrations of Barack Obama and Joe Biden worked to reduce the number of terrorism suspects held at Guantanamo.

Laken Riley was out for a run in February 2024 when she was killed by Jose Antonio Ibarra, a Venezuelan national who was in the country illegally. Ibarra [was found guilty in November](#) and sentenced to life without parole.

Ibarra had been arrested for illegal entry in September 2022 near El Paso, Texas, and released to pursue his case in immigration court. Federal officials say he was arrested by New York police in August 2023 for child endangerment and released. Police say he was also issued a citation for shoplifting in Georgia in October 2023.

The act quickly passed the newly Republican-controlled Congress with some Democratic support even though opponents said it possibly could lead to large roundups of people for offenses as minor as shoplifting.

The swift passage, and Trump's quickly signing it, adds to the potent symbolism for conservatives. To critics, the measure has taken advantage of a tragedy and could lead to chaos and cruelty while doing little to fight crime or overhaul the immigration system.

Riley's mother thanked Trump while holding back tears.

"He said he would secure our borders and he would never forget about Laken and he hasn't," she said.

Several top Republican lawmakers and Noem attended the signing ceremony, as did Democratic Sen. John Fetterman of Pennsylvania, a cosponsor.

Under the new law, federal officials would have to detain any immigrant arrested or charged with crimes such as theft or assaulting a police officer, or offenses that injure or kill someone. State attorneys general could sue the U.S. government for harm caused by federal immigration decisions — potentially allowing the leaders of conservative states to help dictate immigration policy set by Washington.

Some Democrats have questioned whether it is constitutional. The ACLU says the law can allow people to be "mandatorily locked up — potentially for years — because at some point in their lives, perhaps decades ago, they were accused of nonviolent offenses."

Hannah Flamm, interim senior director of policy at the International Refugee Assistance Project, said the measure violates immigrants' basic rights by allowing for detaining people who have not been charged with wrongdoing, much less convicted.

"The latent fear from the election cycle of looking soft on crime snowballed into aiding and abetting

Trump's total conflation of immigration with crime," Flamm said.

She also noted, "I think it is pivotal to understand: This bill, framed as connected to a tragic death, is pretext to fortify a mass deportation system."

Associated Press writers Rebecca Santana and Ellen Knickmeyer contributed to this report.



WILL WEISSERT

Weissert covers national politics and the White House for The Associated Press. He is based in Washington.



The Associated Press
Advancing the Power of Facts

The Associated Press is an independent global news organization dedicated to factual reporting. Founded in 1846, AP today remains the most trusted source of fast, accurate, unbiased news in all formats and the essential provider of the technology and services vital to the news business. More than half the world's population sees AP journalism every day.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

[AP.ORG](#)

[CAREERS](#)

[ADVERTISE WITH US](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

[ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT](#)

[TERMS OF USE](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[YOUR PRIVACY CHOICES](#)

[DO NOT SELL OR SHARE MY PERSONAL INFORMATION](#)

[LIMIT USE AND DISCLOSURE OF SENSITIVE PERSONAL INFORMATION](#)

[CA NOTICE OF COLLECTION](#)

MORE FROM AP NEWS

[ABOUT](#)

[AP NEWS VALUES AND PRINCIPLES](#)

[AP'S ROLE IN ELECTIONS](#)

[AP LEADS](#)

[AP DEFINITIVE SOURCE BLOG](#)

[AP IMAGES SPOTLIGHT BLOG](#)

[AP STYLEBOOK](#)

Copyright 2025 The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.

