

Deportees Recount Harrowing Journeys to Africa: Shackles, a ‘Freezer’ and Blows

Ten deportees said they experienced or witnessed what they called abusive or violent treatment by ICE. They spent months in detention, they said, before being sent to nations where they had no ties.



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By Emmanuel Akinwotu, Pranav Baskar, Genevieve Glatzsky and Hamed Aleaziz

Emmanuel Akinwotu traveled to Marshall, Liberia, to interview several deportees at their hotel. Pranav Baskar reported from New York; Genevieve Glatzsky from Bogotá, Colombia; and Hamed Aleaziz from Washington.

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Leonardo Sánchez wailed in pain for hours on the deportation flight from Louisiana to West Africa, he and six other detainees said.

He'd been cuffed around his wrists and ankles. A chain around his waist dug into his grossly protruding abdomen — the result of years-old wounds and surgeries that doctors said left his intestines barely inside his body.

Mr. Sánchez, a 49-year-old Cuban, begged for medical attention from several of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents on the aircraft.

“I was in pain, crying like a little kid,” he said. But the agents wouldn't remove his chains or let him use the toilet, he and other detainees said. He wet himself.

Like many of the more than two dozen deportees on the flight with him, Mr. Sánchez said he did not know where he was being taken. Several panicked when they suspected it was Liberia, after one of them saw it written on a sheet of paper held by an ICE official in Louisiana.

When some protested, they were beaten by agents, five of the deportees said. Some were slammed to the ground or struck with blows, several said. One showed cuts along his wrists and bruises around his neck, which he said he received after resisting getting on the plane. Another said some deportees were left screaming in pain.



The New York Times

The planeload of deportees, which arrived in Liberia this month, carried the first of 1,200 people expected to be sent to the West African country by the United States over the next year. The arrangement is one of the largest in a growing number of deals the Trump administration has made to send deportees — including people with court orders protecting them from being sent back to their home countries — to nations halfway across the world where they have no ties.

In recent weeks, the White House has pushed to expand these so-called third-country deportation efforts and boost the number of people expelled from the United States, according to a U.S. official. In July, ICE arrests jumped to nearly

50,000 people, and the administration has focused on deporting people who have been able to remain in the country for years with court orders protecting them from being sent home, another official added.

The New York Times interviewed 10 of the deportees on the flight to Liberia, all of whom described a harrowing journey that included months in detention in the United States and a panicked 14-hour expulsion to Africa, in which agents wrestled and shackled frightened detainees.

Several spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. All of them said they experienced or witnessed what they described as abusive or violent treatment by ICE officials during the course of their deportation or while in detention in the United States.

“They didn’t treat us like people, like human beings,” said Carlos Téllez-Sanchez, a deportee from Venezuela who was expelled to Liberia. “They can say or do anything to you and there’s nothing you can do.”



Carlos Téllez-Sanchez, at the beach in Marshall, Liberia, last week. Carielle Doe for The New York Times

The White House, Department of Homeland Security and State Department said in statements that the only deportees being sent to third countries are those who cannot be returned to their home nations or refuse to go back.

“As Secretary Rubio has said, we remain unwavering in our commitment to end illegal and mass immigration,” said Tommy Pigott, a State Department spokesman.

When the flight arrived in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia, Mr. Sánchez, the Cuban national, and three others said they refused to disembark, afraid of being abandoned in an unfamiliar country. They said they were forced onto the tarmac by ICE officers who yanked and twisted their handcuffs, pinned them to the ground and pressed their knees directly onto their necks.

Mr. Sánchez said the federal agents knocked him onto the ground and knelt on his bulging abdomen, leaving him in agony, his pants still damp with urine. Other deportees began shouting, “‘You abuser! If he dies, it’s on you!’” Mr. Sánchez and three other deportees said.

The Department of Homeland Security said that no detainees were refused access to the bathroom, that Mr. Sánchez was reviewed and declared fit to fly by medical staff, that his medical needs were addressed on the flight, and that agents did not kneel or press on his abdomen.

It did not address many of the deportees’ other allegations of abuse.

Mr. Sánchez, crying in pain, said he was carried back onto the flight in Liberia with the others. Then, they were then taken to Equatorial Guinea, one of at least 35 countries with which the United States has struck deportation deals, most of them in Africa.

“Basically, they treated us like we were wild animals,” said Carlos Rodríguez, another Cuban national on the flight. “Like beasts.”



Paola Dos Santos, who was deported to Liberia, stands near the hotel where she is staying in Liberia, last week. Carielle Doe for The New York Times

‘The Freezer’

Three of the deportees, including 21-year-old Paola Dos Santos, a Brazilian national who was deported to Liberia, said they suffered “psychological torture” from ICE officials while detained in the United States.

Ms. Dos Santos, who said she was detained for 15 months in two separate U.S. facilities, recounted detainees routinely being denied medical care, including pregnant women. One woman who pleaded for information about her son, who had been separated from her, had her hands and ankles tied together, Ms. Dos Santos said: “They tied her like she was a cattle.”

The Department of Homeland Security said that detainees receive “comprehensive medical care” from the moment they enter ICE custody, including dental, mental health services and prenatal and postnatal care.

“No one is being tortured, denied medical care, or beaten in ICE detention facilities,” the department added after publication of this article. To the contrary, it said, there has been a “more than 1,300 percent increase in assaults against our officers.”

Some of the deportees said they were constantly moved from facility to facility, and sometimes kept in detention centers where up to 50 people shared a single toilet. Many said they were held for days in a painfully cold room without beds that they called “the freezer.”

Late last year, Mr. Téllez-Sanchez, the deportee from Venezuela, said he was working at a car dealership in Dallas and looking forward to the birth of his son. He’d been in the United States for five years after a judge granted him an order protecting him from being sent back to his home country, he and a lawyer working with him said. Then in December, he was arrested on a routine visit to renew his work permit.

When he tried to explain to immigration officials that he had a court order preventing his deportation, he said an ICE agent told him to shut up.

He said he witnessed constant verbal abuse by ICE officials while in detention. While parts of the deportees’ accounts could not be independently verified, The Times was able to confirm certain details with lawyers and government officials.

“The whole time, I cooperated,” Mr. Téllez-Sanchez said. “I got a lawyer, I started a legal case. I didn’t want to risk it, I wanted to do the right thing.”

“They didn’t care,” he added.

In eight months of detention, he was moved more than six times, he said. Alma David, the lawyer working with him, said that constantly moving deportees between states was a common tactic by ICE to prevent detainees from launching

legal challenges.

“It’s a kind of psychological warfare,” she said.

Deportees are often confused when they are arrested while trying to renew their work permits or asylum papers, unaware that ICE officials are targeting people who have protection orders like Mr. Téllez-Sanchez, said Ms. David.

The administration’s rapid deportations to third countries are being contested in the courts. In February, a judge declared the policy unlawful, but an appeals court has allowed the government to continue the deportations while it reviews the case.

Now, the Trump administration is boosting deportations by sending people “to countries like Liberia where they have zero ties, don’t speak the language and simply cannot imagine surviving,” said Ms. David.

‘We’re Going to Shoot Off Your Feet’

Mr. Sánchez, the Cuban man who was writhing in pain on the flight to Liberia, said he had arrived in the United States in 2010 under the Cuban Adjustment Act and worked as a welder, building windows and doors.

In 2018, he was stabbed and shot in his stomach during a robbery in Miami that left him in a coma for 40 days, he said. Doctors who reviewed pictures of his abdomen said they appeared consistent with his descriptions of what happened to him.



Leonardo Sánchez

In early 2025, he said he received a one-year probation order following a traffic stop that resulted in a conviction for cocaine possession. He said he completed 40 hours of community service and paid a \$3,200 fine. The Department of Homeland Security said Mr. Sánchez was a criminal who “received due process and was ordered removed from the United States” in May.

When the flight landed in Liberia, deportees said ICE agents called their names one by one to exit the plane, and that those who resisted were forcibly removed. Mr. Rodríguez, one of the Cubans, said he had four officers on top of him at once.

Several deportees who resisted disembarking said they got back on the plane after being told they would be returned to the United States.

Instead, they were taken to Equatorial Guinea, loaded into a van, left at a hotel and barred from leaving. They are under constant watch by guards carrying automatic weapons, they said in phone interviews.

“They told us: ‘If you try to escape, we’re going to shoot off your feet,’” said Darwin Hernández, also from Cuba.

The doctors who reviewed pictures of Mr. Sánchez’s abdomen said his condition did not appear to be life threatening, but that the thin layer of grafted skin holding in his intestines was extremely vulnerable, susceptible to injury and should be

repaired through surgery.

When he finally saw medical staff in Equatorial Guinea, Mr. Sánchez said, doctors there told him that the country lacked the equipment needed to treat him. They gave him a simple painkiller, he said.



One of the deportees sent to Liberia standing on the balcony of a hotel last week. Carielle Doe for The New York Times

Life in Liberia

In Liberia, where most of the deportees were taken, Mr. Téllez-Sanchez, the Venezuelan, is trying to make sense of his new surroundings.

He and a few others occasionally take short walks, leaving the partly built, three-story hotel they were placed in by the Liberian government. Outside, over half a dozen security guards and Liberian officials stand watch.

“They said we have freedom to move around, but I don’t feel free,” Mr. Téllez-Sanchez said. “I’m not a criminal. I don’t deserve what has happened to me.”

Liberia said that none of the deportees it has taken are criminals, and that they would be allowed to apply for residency in the country.

Officials from the International Organization for Migration, a U.N. agency, said in a statement that they had provided assistance to the deportees, and would help send them back to their home countries or find “other available pathways.”

Many of the deportees are now trying to figure out what to do — settle in an unfamiliar African nation or return to countries where they fear persecution?

Mr. Téllez-Sanchez, who fled Venezuela in 2019, said he hoped to be allowed back in the United States, but was not so optimistic: “Maybe it won’t be possible.”

For now, he said, he just wants to see his family, including the newborn son he has yet to hold.



Mr. Téllez-Sanchez, far left, and others from the group deported to Liberia, take a walk together, last week. Carielle Doe for The New York Times

Mattathias Schwartz and Carielle Doe contributed reporting.

Corrected on Aug. 30, 2026: Because of an editing error, a picture caption with an earlier version of this article misstated when a plane carrying deportees landed in Liberia. It was on Aug. 20, not last Thursday.

We acknowledge mistakes in our reporting with corrections. If you spot an error, please let us know at corrections@nytimes.com. [Learn more.](#)

Pranav Baskar is an international reporter at The Times, based in New York.

Genevieve Glatzky is a reporter for The Times, based in Bogotá, Colombia.

Hamed Aleaziz covers the Department of Homeland Security and immigration policy for The Times.

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