

60 Minutes on Global TV  
12/22/25  
Time N/A  
13 minutes and 31 seconds

SHARYN ALFONSI: You may recall earlier this year when the Trump administration deported hundreds of Venezuelan men to El Salvador, a country most had no connection to. The White House claimed the men were terrorists, part of a violent gang, and invoked a centuries-old wartime power, saying it allowed them to deport some men immediately without due process, an unusual strategy that sparked an ongoing legal battle. Tonight you'll hear from some of those men. They described torture, sexual, and physical abuse inside CENCOT, one of El Salvador's harshest prisons, where they say they endured four months of hell. It began as soon as the planes landed. The deportees thought they were headed back to Venezuela, but then saw hundreds of Salvadoran police waiting for them on the tarmac. Shackled, they were paraded in front of cameras, pushed onto buses, and delivered to CECOT, El Salvador's notorious maximum security prison.

LUIS MUNOZ PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: When we got there, the CENCOT director was talking to us. The first thing he told us was that we would never see the light of day or night again. He said, Welcome to hell. I'll make sure you never leave.

ALFONSI [TO PINTO]: Did you think you were going to die there?

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: We thought we were already the living dead, honestly.

ALFONSI: We met Luis Munoz Pinto in Colombia. He was a college student in repressive Venezuela and hoped to seek asylum in the United States in 2024. He says he waited in Mexico until his scheduled appointment with U.S. Customs and Border Protection in California. During that interview —

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: They just looked at me and told me I was a danger to society.

ALFONSI [TO PINTO]: You have no criminal record?

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: Nothing. I don't even, I never even got a traffic ticket.

ALFONSI: Nevertheless, he was detained by Customs. He says he spent six months locked up in the U.S. waiting for a decision on his asylum case when he was deported, one of 252 Venezuelans sent to CECOT between March and April. Inside, he says their hands and feet were tied, forced to their knees, their heads were shaved.

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: There was blood everywhere, screams, people crying, people who couldn't take it and were urinating and vomiting on themselves. When you get there, you already know you're in hell. You don't need anyone else to tell you.

ALFONSI: He says the guards began savagely beating them with their fists and batons. [TO PINTO] Tell me about what they did to you personally.

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: Four guards grabbed me and they beat me until I bled to the point of agony. They knocked our faces against the wall. That was when they broke one of my teeth.

ALFONSI: CECOT, the terrorism confinement center, was built in 2022 as a key part of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's sweeping anti-gang crackdown. The massive prison designed to hold 40,000 inmates and its harsh reputation are a point of pride for Bukele, who regularly allows social media influencers to tour it.

INFLUENCER: As you can see, we're literally in the middle of the desert.

ALFONSI: Guards show off cramped cells where metal bunks are stacked four-high. There are no mattresses or sheets. Inmates said they had no access to the outdoors and no contact with relatives. International observers warned CECOT was violating the UN standard for minimum treatment of prisoners, and two years ago during the Biden administration, the U.S. State Department cited "torture...and life-threatening prison conditions" in its report on El Salvador, but this year during a meeting with President Bukele at the White House, President Trump expressed admiration for El Salvador's prison system.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP [ON 04/14/25]: They're great facilities, very strong facilities, and they don't play games.

ALFONSI: In March, the U.S. struck a deal to pay El Salvador \$4.7 million to house Venezuelan deportees at CECOT.

WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY KAROLINE LEAVITT [on 04/17/25]: These are heinous monsters, rapists, murderers, kidnappers, sexual assaulters, predators who have no right to be in this country, and they must be held accountable.

ALFONSI [TO PAPIER]: The U.S. government said these people are the worst of the worst.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH AMERICAS DEPUTY DIRECTOR JUAN PAPIER: These people are migrants, and the sad reality is that the U.S. government tried to make an example out of them. They sent them to a place where they were likely to be tortured, to send migrants across Latin America the message that they should not come to the United States.

ALFONSI: Juan Pappier is a deputy director at the nonprofit Human Rights Watch. In an 81-page report released in November, the organization concluded there was systematic torture and other abuses at CECOT, and that nearly half of the Venezuelans the U.S. sent there had no criminal history. Only eight of the men had been convicted of a violent or potentially violent offense. [TO PAPIER] How do you know they weren't gang members?

PAPPIER: We cross referenced federal databases, databases in all 50 states in the United States, and also obtained criminal records in Venezuela and in the countries where these people lived. And the information we obtained in the United States is based on data provided by ICE.

ALFONSI [TO PAPPIER]: So, ICE's own records said?

PAPPIER: ICE's own records say that only three percent of them had been sentenced for a violent or potentially violent crime.

ALFONSI: *60 Minutes* reviewed the available ICE data. It confirms the findings of Human Rights Watch. It shows 70 men had pending criminal charges in the U.S., which could include immigration violations. We don't know because the Department of Homeland Security has never released a complete list of the names or criminal histories of the men it sent to CECOT. Rapid deportations have been a key part of the Trump administration's immigration overhaul. The administration considers anyone who crosses the border illegally to be a criminal. Illegal crossings are now at a historic low, but some immigration attorneys say the administration has used flawed criteria to justify deportations.

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: I have some tattoos. None of them have anything to do with any criminal group. I explained to them, saying that I didn't belong to any gang. To which the agent responded, But you are Venezuelan.

ALFONSI: *60 Minutes* reviewed this document agents used to assess Venezuelans. A person with eight points was designated as a Tren de Arragua gang member and deportable. Tattoos that immigration officers suspected of being gang related earned four points. But criminologists who study gangs say tattoos are not a reliable way to identify Venezuelan gang members because unlike some Central American gangs such as MS-13, Tren de Arragua does not use tattoos to signal membership. Venezuelan national William Lozada Sanchez was also deported to CECOT. He told us the guards there also accused Venezuelans with tattoos of being gang members. He detailed months of abuse and being forced into stress positions. [TO SANCHEZ] So, you had to be on your knees for 24 hours?

WILLIAM LOZADA SANCHEZ [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: Yes, because they put a guard there to watch us so that we wouldn't move.

ALFONSI [TO SANCHEZ]: And what would happen if you could make it?

SANCHEZ [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: They'd take us to the island.

ALFONSI [TO SANCHEZ]: What's the island?

SANCHEZ [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: The island is a little room where there's no light, no ventilation, nothing. It's a cell for punishment where you can't see your hand in front of your face. After they locked us in, they came to beat us every half hour, and they pounded on the door with their sticks to traumatize us while we were in there.

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: The torture was never ending. They would take you there and beat you for hours and leave you locked in there for days.

ALFONSI: Some of the deportees described being sexually assaulted by the guards. [TO PINTO] They were hitting your private parts?

PINTO: Si.

ALFONSI [TO PINTO]: With a baton?

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: No, no, they tugged at them with their hands,

ALFONSI [TO PINTO]: And they did that to multiple people?

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: To most of us.

ALFONSI: The men say they grew weaker by the day. They claim the prison lights were left on 24 hours a day, making it difficult to sleep, and that food and medicine were often withheld. [TO PINTO] Did you have access to clean water?

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: They never gave us access to clean water. The same water from our baths and toilets was the same water that we had to drink and survive on. If we had serious injuries when the doctors examined us, they told us that drinking water would heal it.

ALFONSI [TO PINTO]: So, they're telling the injured prisoners to drink water and the water's filthy?

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: Super filthy. The sicker and more injured we were, the better it was for them.

ALFONSI: In late March, about 10 days after the first US deportees arrived, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem toured the prison. Did they speak to anybody, any of the prisoners?

PINTO [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: Never, not with any of the detainees. They never spoke to us. We only saw the cameras.

ALFONSI: At some point, Secretary Noem went to another area of the prison to record this video.

HOMELAND SECURITY SECRETARY KRISTI NOEM: I want to thank El Salvador and their president for their partnership with the United States of America to bring our terrorists here and to incarcerate them, and —

ALFONSI [TO PAPIER]: There were men standing behind her, heavily tattooed. Who are those

men? Do we know?

PAPPIER: We know that those men in her video are not Venezuelans. They are Salvadorans probably accused of being gang leaders, and probably people who have been in jail for many, many years in El Salvador.

ALFONSI: Human Rights Watch was able to confirm that with the help of this intrepid team of students at UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center.

UC BERKELEY STUDENT #1: All the visible men have either an MS on their chest or a 13 or an ES for El Salvador, and all those gangs are associated with El Salvador.

ALFONSI [TO UC BERKELEY STUDENT #1]: Not the Venezuelans?

UC BERKELEY STUDENT #1: Yeah

ALFONSI: To help verify the deportees' stories for Human Rights Watch, the team of students combed through open source data for weeks. Students are trained in advanced techniques and follow strict international standards for obtaining digital evidence that can be used in courts. Analyzing satellite imagery, they mapped the prison, and identified the building where the Venezuelans were held. And remember all those influencers who filmed inside CECOT? One toured an isolation cell. These are the rooms of solitary confinement that matched the description of the so-called island where the deportees described being tortured.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER: And they get absolutely nothing to use to sleep or to rest. Just pure concrete.

ALFONSI: A show and tell the armory confirmed CECOT had the weapons the Venezuelans say guards used on them.

UC BERKELEY STUDENT #2: What we did see in these videos was the use of the Ti batons on prisoners. Additionally, we also saw the use of painful body positions.

ALFONSI [TO UC BERKELEY STUDENT #2]: They were showing that off in the videos?

UC BERKELEY STUDENT #2: And they do that. It's sort of a practice.

ALFONSI: But it was this interview with the prison warden that proved to be most helpful.

CECOT PRISON WARDEN [VOICE OF TRANSLATOR]: The light system is 24 hours a day.

UC BERKELEY STUDENT #2: One of the questions that we had was, are the lights on 24/7? He said, yes, they are. So, he's talking about how hot it can get in the prison. So, there's this sort of Pride around the poor conditions and around the suffering.

ALFONSI: Using extreme temperatures or light to disorient inmates is also prohibited under UN standards.

HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER CO-FACULTY DIRECTOR ALEXA KOENIG: I think one of the things that the work of this team has really shown is that a lot of these stories can be believed.

ALFONSI: Alexa Koenig is the director of Berkeley's Investigations Lab, which trains students to research war crimes and human rights violations,

KOENIG: And it's those little details that I think then if you can bring that together with the physical evidence, I think you have the strongest possible case for accountability, whether it's in court of public opinion or at some point in a court of law.

ALFONSI: The Department of Homeland Security declined our request for an interview and referred all questions about CECOT to El Salvador. The government there did not respond to our request. In July, after four months, the 252 Venezuelan men were finally released from CECOT and sent back to Caracas in exchange for 10 Americans that had been imprisoned in Venezuela. The Trump administration has arranged more deals, some valued at millions of dollars, to offload U.S. deportees to other so-called third countries, nations to which they have no connection. Among them, war-torn South Sudan and Uganda, which have well-documented histories of torturing prisoners.