

EXTERNALISATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL IMMIGRATION DETENTION GULAG ARCHIPELAGO

*SUBMISSION TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON
THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF MIGRANTS*

SUBMITTED: DECEMBER 2025



GLOBALDETENTIONPROJECT

THE GLOBAL DETENTION PROJECT MISSION

The Global Detention Project (GDP) is a non-profit organisation based in Geneva that promotes the human rights of people who have been detained for reasons related to their non-citizen status. Our mission is:

- To promote the human rights of detained migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers;
- To ensure transparency in the treatment of immigration detainees;
- To reinforce advocacy aimed at reforming detention systems;
- To nurture policy-relevant scholarship on the causes and consequences of migration control policies.

Global Detention Project

3 rue de Varembe

1202 Geneva

Switzerland

Email: admin@globaldetentionproject.org

Website: www.globaldetentionproject.org

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The Global Detention Project (GDP) welcomes the opportunity to provide input ahead of the Special Rapporteur's preparation of his second report on the externalisation of migration governance and its impact on migrants. This submission draws on our monitoring and documentation of detention practices as part of externalisation schemes, highlighting the ongoing rights violations committed against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers forcibly removed to third countries.

Our report also draws attention to the compelling connection between externalisation and the spread of arbitrary immigration detention practices across the globe. The decades-long efforts of wealthy states to export migration control practices to countries in the Global South have led to the emergence of new immigration detention regimes in countries that lack basic oversight mechanisms, legal grounds for detention, transparency, or the basic rule of law, resulting in a growing population of detained migrants and refugees vulnerable to extreme human rights abuses with little or no recourse to remedies or justice.

1. RECENT TRENDS: HEAVY RELIANCE UPON DETENTION

Since Spring 2025, the Global Detention Project has carefully documented the growing number of bilateral agreements facilitating the externalisation of migrant and asylum management—many of which involve the United States. These include agreements with countries including **Kosovo, Ghana, Uganda, Eswatini, South Sudan**, and most recently, **Equatorial Guinea**. According to Human Rights First, who house the ICE Flight Monitor, as of October the Trump administration had carried out at least 21 flights carrying third country nationals to ten countries (**Costa Rica, El Salvador, Eswatini, Ghana, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Uzbekistan**).ⁱ Third country transfers have also been conducted over the border to **Mexico**.ⁱⁱ Generally, these transfers have occurred with short or no notice, with deportees denied any opportunity to contest their removal from the United States. Documentation also reveals that they have involved abusive treatment and violence, with deportees frequently shackled for large parts of the journey.ⁱⁱⁱ

For receiving states, these agreements appear to be less about humanitarian responsibility, and more about serving political, economic, and geo-strategic objectives. This was emphasised to the GDP by an observer in Kosovo, who—discussing Kosovo's rationale for agreeing to accept deportees from the U.S and the U.K—noted that: “When it comes to Kosovo, it's a young country that needs support for its claims of independence, as well as financial support for sectors like security.”^{iv}

In Uganda, which signed an agreement with the United States in July 2025, domestic critics argue that President Museveni is using the deal to ease international pressure on his government—which faces accusations of persistent corruption and weakening commitment to democracy.^v Media outlets, meanwhile, confirm that Eswatini received 5.1 million USD from the United States to receive deportees,^{vi} and reports suggest authorities in the country may be using the deal to curry favour in the U.S to negotiate better trade terms.^{vii}

Yet, regardless of the reasoning for agreements, one thing is clear: far from safeguarding migrants', refugees', and asylum seekers' rights, these (often opaque, and largely performative) arrangements continue to lead to serious rights violations, and are disappearing people without due process. As one refugee-protection expert stated in an interview with the New Yorker, the specific face of deportees often remains "a total black hole."^{viii}

In many cases, agreements—seemingly concluded with minimal or no legal safeguards or oversight—facilitate the transfer of migrants to countries with minimal reception infrastructure and weak legal protections. Commonly, detention has featured at the centre of these arrangements, with deportees subjected to arbitrary and abusive detention with inadequate access to basic rights—as well as, in some cases, forced removal and refoulement.

In several cases, such as the 30 April removal of Kyrgyz and Kazakh nationals to Uzbekistan, little information is known about the deportees themselves, leaving observers with serious concerns regarding what protection claims they may have had in the U.S, and whether their inclusion in such schemes has led to their refoulement to a country where they face serious risk of abuse.^{ix}

1.1 Detention Upon Arrival

In May, eight men from Cuba, Laos, Mexico, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Vietnam were temporarily locked up in a converted shipping container at Camp Lemonnier, a U.S military base in **Djibouti**. (Originally scheduled for deportation to South Sudan, the group disembarked in Djibouti after a 21 May order from a U.S district judge, which required the administration to retain the group in U.S custody.) In a sworn court declaration, a U.S Department of Homeland Security (DHS) official discussed the conditions that the group faced in the camp. Confirming that they were being detained in a conference room within a converted shipping container, she noted that the room was "not equipped nor suitable for detention of any length, let alone for the detention of high-risk individuals," and noted their exposure to extreme heat, a lack of necessary medications, combat-esque movement restrictions, and poor quality air.^x

As the GDP noted in June,^{xi} the use of military bases for detaining non-nationals poses significant human rights issues, including regarding detainees' lack of access to legal representation, the absence of judicial oversight, limited public scrutiny of detention operations, and serious safety risks. Camp Lemonnier, for example, remains at risk of attack by virtue of its role as a prominent military installation in an unstable region.

In **Eswatini**, to where five men were removed in mid-July in-line with a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) signed with the U.S on 14 May 2025, deportees were detained without charge or due process in the notorious [Matsapha Correctional Complex](#), a maximum-security prison which has been heavily criticised in the past for abusive practices—including the denial of food to a political prisoner.^{xii} (The country's prison system, more generally, has previously been criticised by the U.S State Department for reasons including decaying facilities, poor ventilation, inadequate food and medical provision, and prisoner-on-prisoner violence.)^{xiii} According to U.S lawyers, the men have been denied access to legal counsel and granted only occasional opportunity to communicate with family, while an Eswatini government spokesman noted that they were being held in solitary confinement.^{xiv} But as the Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC) noted: "regardless of the reason for the detainees' detention, whether as transferred offenders, prohibited immigrants, or for other reasons, their

right to access a legal practitioner and communicate with family is inviolable.”^{xv} According to an Eswatini government spokesman, the men will be detained for approximately 12 months—although “it could be slightly less or slightly more.”^{xvi} A second flight of third country nationals left for Eswatini on 5 October.^{xvii}

In **Ghana**, which received an initial group of 14 West African migrants and asylum seekers in early September, sworn declarations^{xviii} reveal that upon arrival, at least one of the deportees was held in a room at the airport for five days “with no access to phones, no showers, and no changes of clothes,”^{xix} while 11 others were detained at [Dema Camp \(part of the Bundase Training Camp\)](#)—an “open air detention facility surrounded by armed military guards” about 50 kilometres outside Accra.

The GDP has documented numerous worrying reports regarding this camp, including detainees’ exposure to heat, snakes and scorpions, and unsanitary water; claims that at least one detainee had contracted Malaria “due to bad water and bad food”; and allegations that there was no reliable power or internet.^{xx} Several of those detained were later pushed across the border into Togo without being provided with documentation. According to one who spoke to a New Yorker writer, he was trying to stay indoors out of fear of being detained by Togolese authorities.^{xxi} As of early December, four third-country transfer flights have been recorded as landing in Ghana carrying at least 60 people, many of whom had been granted withholding of removal or protection under the Convention against Torture by U.S immigration judges.^{xxii}

1.2 Externalisation Accompanied by Detention Expansion: Uganda

In July, **Uganda** signed a deal with the United States—“Cooperation in the Examination of Protection Requests,”^{xxiii}—which provides that Uganda will accept third country nationals who have pending asylum claims in the U.S. To-date, we have not documented the transfer of any third country nationals to Uganda under the deal, however the deal itself provides cause for concern. While it includes several provisions, such as Uganda’s agreement not to return any deportees to their home country until a decision has been made regarding their protection claim (Article 3(1)), the agreement itself provides little concrete assurance of rights protections. It does not, for example, clarify what accommodation or support deportees will receive upon arrival in Uganda.

This is particularly concerning given Uganda’s past treatment of third country deportees. Between 2015 and 2018, Israel deported 1,749 Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers to the country. According to Amnesty International, upon arrival in Uganda, deportees found a “shambolic reception,” which left them “without papers, without protection and without sustainable resources.”^{xxiv} Others were subjected to forced returns to potentially dangerous situations in their home countries.^{xxv}

Shortly after the agreement was signed, Uganda’s cabinet approved a new National Migration Strategy.^{xxvi} Although the strategy does not explicitly reference the deal, its timing raises important questions about whether externalisation pressures may be driving a move towards more restrictive migration controls. Of particular concern, among the strategy’s priorities is the creation of new detention sites—“put in place custody centres at all immigration offices for the management of irregular migrants in the country.” (According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there are 97 different offices where immigration services may currently be obtained.)^{xxvii} The policy also sets out plans to “establish and operationalize at least three (3) fully functional Migration, Custody, Rehabilitation, and Repatriation Centers by

June 2027, to support humane and lawful management of irregular migrants, victims of trafficking, and deportees.”

The Global Detention Project is concerned by Uganda’s plans to massively build up its immigration detention system—and the prospect that other receiving countries may follow suit. In a recent submission to the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, we urged the committee to “explore with the State party its rationales for building up its immigration detention system, highlighting the high costs and often ineffective outcomes of doing so, and encouraging it to de-emphasise detention in its immigration procedures.”^{xxviii}

2. CHAIN REACTIONS: EXTERNALISATION’S IMPACT ON SHIFTING MIGRATION ROUTES, AND THE REPRODUCTION OF DETENTION PRACTICES

European externalisation deals with North African states likes **Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia** have heavily relied upon securitisation to block migrants from reaching Europe via the Mediterranean. However, these efforts appear to have largely displaced migration flows rather than stopped them, with “successful” measures in one country prompting the adoption of similarly coercive measures along emerging migration routes—raising serious concerns for migrants’ rights and safety.

The impact of European-backed efforts in Morocco clearly illustrates this. Since 2020 in particular, European externalisation efforts have significantly hardened Morocco’s borders, driving a rise in departures instead along the riskier Atlantic route from Mauritania and Senegal. In 2023, the sea route from Senegal to the Canary Islands saw a 161 percent increase,^{xxix} while in 2024, 25,081 migrants were recorded arriving on Spanish territory from Mauritania—compared to 13,217 from Morocco and 12,038 from Algeria.^{xxx}

In response, the EU has deepened its cooperation with Mauritania and Senegal, encouraging similar security-focused measures aimed at blocking irregular migrants. The result is a clear displacement effect: as Morocco’s borders have hardened, countries further south have been pulled deeper into Europe’s migration control architecture, bearing heightened pressures and replicating the same abusive enforcement practices employed by their northern neighbours.

This has been plain to see in our monitoring of detention policies and practices in Mauritania—with an uptick in efforts to detain and remove migrants from the country.

As well as signing both the EU-Mauritanian Migration Partnership^{xxxi} (which included the promise of 210 million EUR for curbing irregular migration) and the Spain-Mauritania MoU on ‘circular migration’ in 2024, pressure from the EU led to the country amending its migration legislation in 2024. Authorities introduced Act No. 2024-038 of 8 October, amending Act No. 65-046 of 23 February 1965 which, as well as continuing to criminalise irregular entry and stay, validates the rapid expulsion of migrants (“any foreigner who commits one of the offenses ... is automatically expelled from the national territory”).

Between 1 January and 25 May 2025 alone, 19,689 migrants were arrested and deported from the country,^{xxxii} with reports detailing sweeping raids targeting homes, workplaces, and streets.^{xxxiii} Alongside this, the country’s detention infrastructure has significantly expanded—from one facility in 2006, established with Spanish assistance, there are now numerous sites used for detention purposes. In Nouakchott, observers reporting to the Global Detention

Project have documented the use of multiple facilities including the [Dar Naim Detention Centre](#), [Arafat Detention Centre](#), and [Cinquième Robinet 10](#) (also referred to as the Sebkhia Detention Facility).

In Senegal, meanwhile, where the EU has also intensified its migration cooperation, the country is increasingly adopting securitised measures—including expanding its detention infrastructure. In October 2024 the EU announced that it would provide 30 million EUR to the country, aimed specifically at developing border surveillance and control, maritime interception, and preventing irregular migration. According to a 2024 European Commission (EC) concept note,^{xxxiv} amongst the key objectives is the construction of four centres to “receive rescued migrants”—which the GDP believes risk becoming de facto detention facilities. According to the EC document, the proposed locations for these centres are Saint Louis, M’bour, the port of Dakar, and Dakar airport.

3. CONCLUSION: THE EMERGENCE OF A GULAG ARCHIPELAGO OF IMMIGRATION DETENTION

The cases described above underscore how detention lies at the heart of—and is an inexorable result of—externalisation schemes. Not only are these schemes systematically violating the fundamental human rights of migrants and asylum seekers across the globe, they are also resulting in the dramatic expansion of harmful detention practices, often in countries that hitherto have not employed detention as an immigration tool.

As the GDP’s Michael Flynn has written, the efforts by wealthy countries to push enforcement mechanisms beyond their borders has become a formidable engine for the diffusion of immigration detention across the globe. This is leading to “the establishment of an archipelago of emerging detention regimes that literally spans the globe.”^{xxxv}

There is a seeming inevitability to the expansion of detention if countries continue to pursue externalisation programmes, as they will place growing numbers of unwanted migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the hands of countries who, left with mounting unresolvable immigration cases, will turn to detention as a tool of first resort when accepting deportees from wealthier countries.

We hope that the Special Rapporteur will take the opportunity of their second report on externalisation to focus attention on this harmful development, which threatens the well-being of vulnerable non-citizens everywhere today.

ENDNOTES

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