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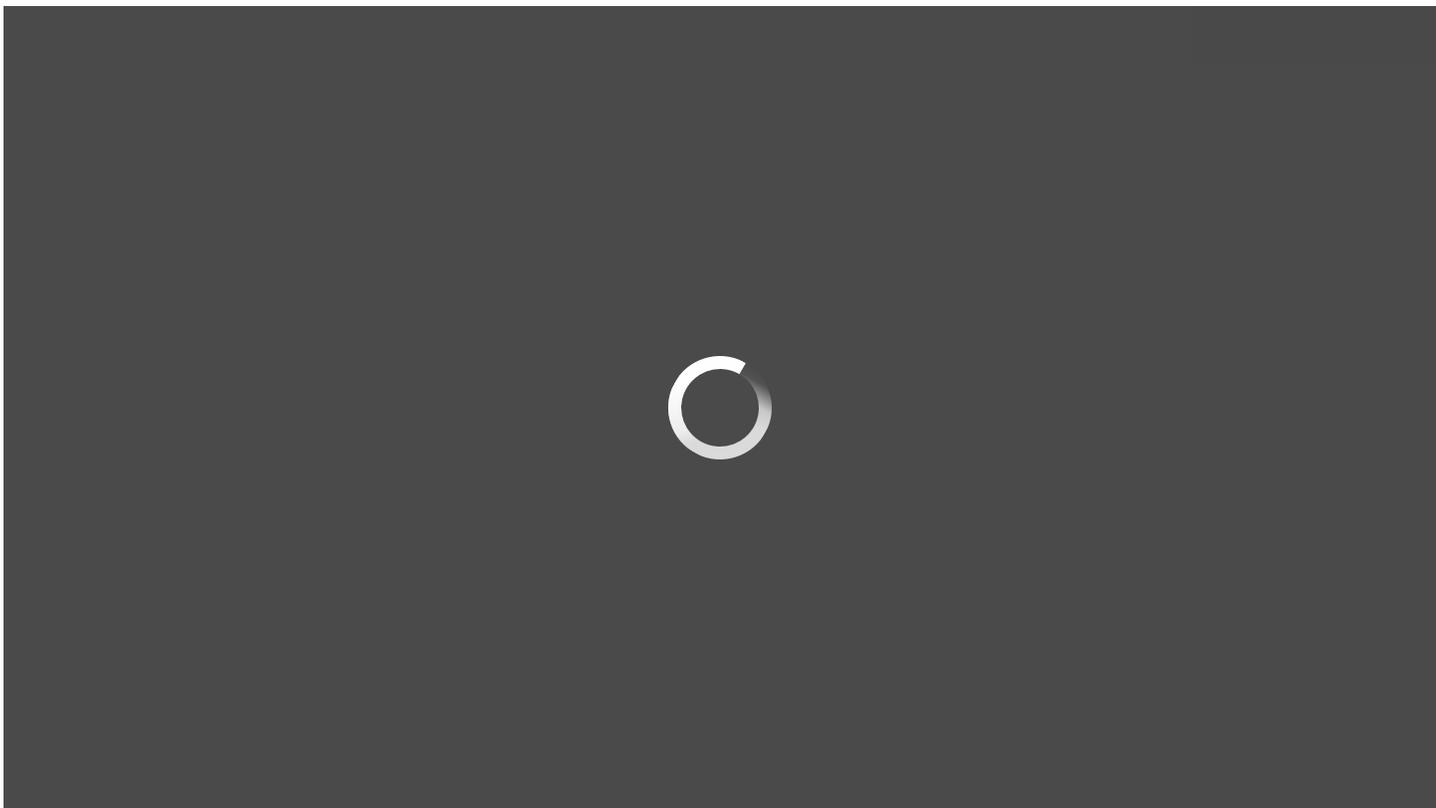
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IMMIGRATION

Father mistakenly deported due in part to Bulls hat won't be released: El Salvador president

Bukele called the idea "preposterous" even though the U.S. Supreme Court has called on the administration to "facilitate" Kilmar Abrego Garcia's return

By NBC Chicago Staff and Associated Press • Published 45 mins ago • Updated 1 hour ago



Police believed Kilmar Abrego Garcia was a member of the MS-13 gang for two reasons: He was wearing a Chicago Bulls hat and hoodie, and an unnamed informant had told them so.

[President Donald Trump's](#) top advisers and Nayib Bukele, the president of El Salvador, [said Monday](#) that they have no basis for the small Central American nation to return a U.S. father who was

mistakenly deported there last month.

Bukele called the idea “preposterous” even though the U.S. Supreme Court has called on the administration to “facilitate” Kilmar Abrego Garcia's return.

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Trump administration officials emphasized that Abrego Garcia, who was sent to a notorious gang prison in El Salvador, was a citizen of that country and that the U.S. has no say in his future. And Bukele, who has been a vital partner for the Trump administration in its deportation efforts, said “of course” he would not release him back to U.S. soil.

“The question is preposterous. How can I smuggle a terrorist into the United States?” Bukele, seated alongside Trump, told reporters in the Oval Office Monday. “I don't have the power to return him to the United States.”

Should El Salvador want to return Abrego Garcia, the U.S. would “facilitate it, meaning provide a plane,” Attorney General Pam Bondi said.

But “first and foremost, he was illegally in our country, and he had been illegally in our country,” she said. “That’s up to El Salvador if they want to return him. That’s not up to us.”

Trump indicated over the weekend that he would return Abrego Garcia to the U.S. if the high court’s justices said to bring him back, saying “I have great respect for the Supreme Court.” But the tone from top administration officials was sharply different on Monday.

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"He's a citizen of El Salvador," said Stephen Miller, a White House deputy chief of staff. "So it's very arrogant, even for American media, to suggest that we would even tell El Salvador how to handle their own citizens."

Bondi asserted that two immigration court judges – who are under Justice Department purview – found that Abrego Garcia was a member of MS-13, although the man's attorneys say the government has provided no evidence that he was affiliated with MS-13 or any other gang. The allegation is based on a confidential informant's claim in 2019 that Abrego Garcia was a member of a chapter in New York, where he has never lived. It also cited the fact that [he was wearing a Chicago Bulls hat](#) when he was arrested. He was never charged with a crime at that time, however.

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He was not deported under the Alien Enemies Act, but the administration has conceded that he shouldn't have been sent to El Salvador because an immigration judge found he likely would face persecution by local gangs.

The White House described Abrego Garcia's deportation to his native country as an "administrative error."

"On March 12, my husband Kilmar was abducted and disappeared by the Trump administration," his wife, Jennifer Vasquez, said last week.

Abrego Garcia's family and lawmakers called for his safe return as efforts to bring him home stalled.

"Kilmar was kidnapped ... and sent to a hideous prison," Rep. Jesus Chuy Garcia said Thursday. "And the question now is: 'Who will be next?'"

The case has sparked nationwide concern.

What happened to Kilmar Abrego Garcia?

Abrego Garcia grew up in El Salvador's capital city, San Salvador, according to court documents filed in U.S. immigration court in 2019. His father was a former police officer. His mother, Cecilia, sold pupusas, the nation's signature dish of flat tortilla pouches that hold steaming blends of cheese, beans or savory pork.

The entire family, including his parents, two sisters and older brother, ran the business from home, court records state.

A local gang, Barrio 18, began extorting the family for "rent money" and threatened to kill his older brother Cesar – or force him into their gang – if they weren't paid, court documents state. The family complied but eventually sent Cesar to the U.S.

Barrio 18 similarly targeted Abrego Garcia, according to his immigration case. When he was 12, the gang threatened to take him away until his father paid them "all of the money that they wanted." They still watched him as he walked to and from school.

The family moved 10 minutes away, but the gang threatened to rape and kill Abrego Garcia's sisters, court records state. The family shut down the business, moved again and eventually sent Abrego Garcia to the U.S.

The family never went to authorities because of rampant police corruption, according to court filings. The gang continued to harass the family after they moved to Guatemala, which borders El Salvador.

Abrego Garcia fled to the U.S. illegally around 2011, according to documents filed in his immigration case. He joined Cesar, now a U.S. citizen, in Maryland and found work in construction.

About five years later, Abrego Garcia met Jennifer Vasquez Sura, a U.S. citizen, the records say. In 2018, after she learned she was pregnant, he moved in with her and her two children. They lived in Prince George's County, just outside Washington.

In 2019, Abrego Garcia went to a Home Depot looking for work when he was arrested by county police, according to court filings. Detectives asked if he was a gang member. After explaining he wasn't, he was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Abrego Garcia later told an immigration judge that he would seek asylum and asked to be released. Vasquez Sura was five months into a high-risk pregnancy.

ICE, however, alleged that he was a certified gang member based on information that came from a confidential informant used by county police, records state. Police also cited his Chicago bulls hat and jersey.

The information was enough for an immigration judge in 2019 to keep Abrego Garcia in jail as his immigration case continued, court records state. The judge said the informant was proven and reliable and had verified his gang membership and rank.

Abrego Garcia later married Vasquez Sura in a Maryland detention center, according to court filings. She gave birth while he was still in jail.

In October 2019, an immigration judge denied Abrego Garcia's asylum request but granted him protection from being deported back to El Salvador because of a "well-founded fear" of gang persecution, according to his case. He was released and ICE did not appeal.

Since then, Abrego Garcia has checked in with ICE yearly while the Department of Homeland Security issued him a work permit, his attorneys said in court filings. Abrego Garcia joined a union and was employed full time as a sheet metal apprentice.

He and Vasquez Sura were raising three kids, including their 5-year-old son, who has autism, is deaf in one ear and unable to verbally communicate, according to the complaint filed against the Trump administration. They're also raising a 9-year-old with autism and a 10-year-old with epilepsy.

In February, the Trump Administration designated MS-13 as a foreign terrorist organization and sought to remove identified members "as expeditiously as possible," U.S. Solicitor General D. John Sauer wrote in Monday's brief to the Supreme Court.

Abrego Garcia was pulled over March 12 outside an IKEA in Baltimore with his son, according to court records. An agent called Vasquez Sura and said she had 10 minutes to retrieve their son or ICE would request child protective services.

Abrego Garcia called his wife from jail and said authorities pressed him about MS-13, according to court documents. They asked about a photo they had of him playing basketball on a public court, and his family's visits to a restaurant serving Mexican and Salvadoran food.

"He would repeat the truth again and again – that he was not in a gang," Vasquez Sura stated in court documents.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration, in its court filings, has pointed to the confidential informant in Prince George's County who deemed him to be a member of MS-13.

Abrego Garcia was sent to El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT, where inmates are packed into cells and never allowed outside. The nation's justice minister has said that those held there [would never return](#) to their communities.

Vasquez Sura recognized Abrego Garcia by his tattoos and head scars in photos from the prison, where she saw video of him being dragged by guards, according to court documents.

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