

# Family of Venezuelan Migrant Sent to Guantánamo: ‘My Brother Is Not a Criminal.’

Luis Alberto Castillo arrived in the United States so that he could “give everything to his son,” said his sister. Then, while scrolling on TikTok, she found out he was headed to Guantánamo.



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By **Julie Turkewitz and Hamed Aleaziz**

Julie Turkewitz reported from Bogotá, Colombia, and Hamed Aleaziz from Washington.

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Luis Alberto Castillo, a father of one from Venezuela, entered the United States on Jan. 19, one day before Donald Trump became president for a second term — swept into office on a promise to treat undocumented migrants with a heavy hand.

By Feb. 4, Mr. Castillo was on a plane to a U.S. Navy base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, best known for a detention center that has long held terrorism suspects accused of launching the deadliest attack on American soil.

That day, the Department of Homeland Security declared that those who had been transferred to the island represented “the worst of the worst” and were all members of a Venezuelan criminal group, the Tren de Aragua.

But in an interview from her home in Colombia, Mr. Castillo’s sister Yajaira Castillo said her brother was not a gang member to be feared, but rather an everyday Venezuelan who had fled his country because of its economic crisis.

She broke down repeatedly during the conversation, crying as she described her pain and confusion around her brother's situation.

“My brother is not a criminal,” she said. “This is all discrimination and xenophobia, just because he's Venezuelan.”

Given that Mr. Castillo had spent such little time in the United States, she questioned how the U.S. government could have determined that he was a member of the Tren de Aragua, or was worthy of such harsh treatment.

After he entered the United States, officials suspected Mr. Castillo of being a member of the gang because of his tattoos, according to two people familiar with his case who were not authorized to discuss it publicly.

He did not admit to being a part of the criminal group. Later, officials assessed his tattoos and interviewed him, and they found that he did not appear to have ties with the Tren de Aragua, the people said.

In an initial email, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security said that Mr. Castillo was in the United States illegally and had final deportation orders issued by a federal judge.

“This administration abides by the rule of law,” said the spokeswoman, Tricia McLaughlin. “During further assessment, intelligence officers could not definitively determine whether the individual is or is not a confirmed member of TDA,” or Tren de Aragua. “He may very well be a member of this vicious gang. He may not be.”

In a follow-up message, Ms. McLaughlin said that the department had received new information that Mr. Castillo was a member of the gang. She did not provide evidence.

“TDA is a pathetic gang for human trafficking, drug trafficking and kidnap for ransom among other heinous crimes,” Ms. McLaughlin said. “The New York Times is more interested in writing sob stories about its disgusting members than justice for its victims.”

In the interview, Mr. Castillo's sister shared a screenshot that indicated that he had not tried to evade authorities when he entered the country. The image included details of an appointment her brother had secured to present himself at the border to claim asylum on Jan. 19 at 7 a.m.

The Biden administration had set up a system for migrants to make these claims and enter the United States legally through an app called CBP One. Mr. Trump ended the program on Jan. 21.

Over the last week, the United States government has sent more than 80 men to Guantánamo Bay as part of a larger plan by the Trump administration to hold as many as 30,000 migrants at the Naval base. So far, all the detainees are believed to be Venezuelans. Some are being held in a prison building on the base, while others are detained at the Migrant Operations Center, a dormitory-style facility. (Mr. Castillo is being held at the migrant center, according to D.H.S.)

U.S. troops are building a tent camp at the site in an effort to vastly expand its capacity to hold detained migrants.

The Pentagon has described the first few Guantánamo arrivals as "high-threat illegal aliens" and their detention at the base as "a temporary measure." But the administration has not released any details proving the men have criminal records or described how officials determined they were a threat.

Mr. Castillo is believed to be among the first 10 men who were sent there from El Paso, Texas, on Feb. 4, because his sister recognized him in a photograph of migrants being sent to Guantánamo that was published on social media by Kristi Noem, the new head of the Department of Homeland Security.

The image, in which Mr. Castillo's head is bowed low and an officer in camouflage and gloves holds his back, was later shared widely on social media. Ms. Castillo happened upon it on TikTok.

The Tren de Aragua, a multinational group born in Venezuela's Aragua state, has expanded to other parts of Latin America and as far as the United States. The Trump administration recently began the process of designating the group as a foreign terrorist organization.

Mr. Castillo has a Michael Jordan tattoo on his neck, which his sister believes border authorities took as a sign that he was a member of the gang. In one of the last messages he sent to her before detention, Mr. Castillo said that he had made it to the border and that officials "treated him badly because of the tattoos," she said.

Ronna Rísquez, a Venezuelan investigative journalist who has written a book about the criminal group, said the authorities would be wrong to assume that someone with a Michael Jordan tattoo is a member.

Some individuals in the Tren de Aragua might wear the symbol, she said, but this has more to do with the fact that basketball — which can be played with limited resources — has become enormously popular in poorer parts of Venezuela over the last few decades.

"The passion for Michael Jordan, because he is the ultimate symbol of basketball, has been around for generations," she said.

Ms. Castillo said the tattoos were simply part of her brother's look, which often included shorts and sneakers and Jordan gear. She shared a past photo of him wearing a sweatshirt with the "jumpman" logo associated with Mr. Jordan.

She said she believed her brother's affinity for Mr. Jordan had turned him into a "guinea pig" for the Trump administration's expanding deportation program.

Like many Venezuelans, Mr. Castillo had left his country years ago and was living in Colombia, washing cars. His sister said he was barely scraping by and had left for the United States in the hopes of making more money "to give everything to his son, to work and work for his son."

His journey to the U.S. southern border began in late 2023, she said. With limited funds, it took him until January of this year to reach Texas. There, she said, he was apprehended by the authorities.

A review of public police records indicates that Mr. Castillo was not convicted of any crimes while in Colombia.

Mr. Castillo is the eighth of nine siblings; four live in Colombia and four others in Venezuela. He will turn 30 on Feb. 23.

The Guantánamo base is best known for its post-9/11 detention facility, operated by the Pentagon. It today holds 15 foreigners as wartime prisoners, separately from the Venezuelans being held there in migrant detention.

Ms. Castillo said she had known little about Guantánamo, only that it was “a high-danger cell for major terrorists” and that once sent there, prisoners “have no rights, that it’s for the worst criminals.”

All she wanted now for her brother, she said, “is for him to be returned.”

“I don’t want him in the hands of any government,” she continued. “What I want is for him to be returned to us.”

Carol Rosenberg contributed reporting from Florida and Simón Posada from Bogotá, Colombia.

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