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Coordinates: 🔍 13°32′1″N 88°48′18″W

Terrorism Confinement Center

Aerial view of the prison

San Vicente

Tecoluca

Tecoluca, El Salvador

Maximum security prison

14,532 (as of 11 June 2024)

31 January 2023; 2 years ago

[hide]

Coordinates (13°32′1″N 88°48′18″W

Operational

Managed by Ministry of Justice and Public

Belarmino García

Security [es]

Salvadoran gang

crackdown

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Terrorism Confinement Center

Article Talk

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"Cecot" redirects here. For the Polish footballer, see Edward Cecot.

The **Terrorism Confinement Center**^[a] (Spanish: *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo*, abbreviated **CECOT**) is a maximum security prison located in Tecoluca, El Salvador. The prison was built in late 2022 amidst a large-scale gang crackdown in the country. The Salvadoran government opened the prison in January 2023 and it began housing inmates the following month.

As of 11 June 2024, CECOT has a population of 14,532 inmates. With a capacity for 40,000 inmates, CECOT is the largest prison in Latin America and one of the largest in the world by prisoner capacity. In March 2025, the Salvadoran government incarcerated over 200 alleged Venezuelan gang members in CECOT that had been deported to the country by the second Donald Trump administration. The prison has been featured in several videos published on social media by Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele. CECOT has been the subject of international media attention and the Salvadoran government has allowed news outlets entry to the prison. CECOT has received praise for its detention of alleged gang members as well as criticism of alleged human rights abuses.

Background [edit]

Gang violence in El Salvador [edit]

Beginning in the 1990s, street gangs began to gain power and influence in El Salvador when their members began to be deported from the United States following the conclusion of the Salvadoran Civil War.^{[1]:6[2]:64} The two largest street gang were Mara Salvatrucha (commonly known as MS-13) and the 18th Street gang (Barrio 18);^[b] other smaller gangs included La Maquina, Mao Mao, and Mirada Loca.^[3] In El Salvador, these gangs recruited young Salvadorans who felt neglected by the Salvadoran government in the aftermath of the civil war.^{[2]:64} By 2020, there were an estimated 60,000 gang members and 400,000 collaborators in El Salvador.^{[1]:6}

Gangs enforced their influence and made money through murder, extortion, drug trafficking, and operating businesses.^{[1]:6[3]} Gangs also influenced national politics by preventing political candidates from campaigning in certain neighborhoods under their control^[3] and gang leaders have stated that they could determine the outcomes of elections.^[4] Due to gang violence, El Salvador had one of the highest homicide rates in the world,^{[5]:2} peaking at a rate of 103 homicides per 100,000 people in 2015 (the highest rate in the world).^{[1]:2}

Anti-crime policies [edit]

During the 1990s and 2000s, the various Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) governments sought to implement "tough on crime" policies in El Salvador to combat the spread of gangs. In 2003 and 2004, the government implemented the *Mano Dura* ("iron fist") and *Super Mano Dura* ("super iron fist") policies that led to the arrests of 30,000 alleged gang members.^{[2]:65} In 2012, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) government, the Catholic Church in El Salvador, and the country's gangs agreed to a truce that initially lowered the country's homicide rate, but by 2014, the truce had faltered and homicides rose again.^{[6]:61–62} In 2015, the Supreme Court of Justice of El Salvador designated both MS-13 and Barrio 18 as terrorist organizations.^{[1]:7[2]:65}

From 2019 to 2020, El Salvador's homicide rate decreased by up to 62 percent.^{[1]:19} Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele credited the decrease to his Territorial Control Plan, but a 2020 analysis by the International Crisis Group (ICG) found "no causal relationship" between the decrease and homicides and the Territorial Control Plan.^{[1]:20} Instead, the ICG attributed the decrease to "quiet, informal understandings between gangs and the government"; the Salvadoran government denied the claim.^[7] In December 2021, the United States Department of the Treasury accused Bukele's government of negotiating with the gangs to reduce homicides; Bukele denied the accusation.^[8]

Salvadoran gang crackdown [edit]

From 25 to 27 March 2022, gangs in El Salvador killed 87 people, 62 of whom were killed on 26 March alone, the deadliest day in Salvadoran history since the end of the civil war in 1992.^{[2]:59[9]} Florida International University research director José Miguel Cruz attributed the murder spike to the breakdown of the alleged truce between gangs and the government.^[10]

In response to the violence, the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador declared a state of exception that suspended several constitutional rights and made it easier for the country's security forces to conduct mass arrests of suspected gang members.^{[11][12]} In the following seven months, around 55,000 suspected gang members had been arrested.^{[2]:60} Due to the large number of arrests, Bukele announced the construction of a new prison — named the Terrorism Confinement Center (abbreviated CECOT) — with a capacity for 40,000 inmates to house those arrested during the gang crackdown.^[13] CECOT was built by three companies (OMNI, DISA, and Contratista General de América Latina, S.A. de C.V.)^[14] and construction cost US\$100 million.^[15] By the time CECOT opened in January 2023, the Salvadoran government had arrested over 62,000 suspected gang members.^[16]

Prison facility [edit]

The Terrorism Confinement Center facility covers 23 hectares (57 acres) and the Salvadoran government oversees the surrounding 140 hectares (350 acres) around the prison. It is located in the district of Tecoluca in a remote area at the base of the San Vicente volcano. CECOT has the capacity for 40,000 inmates in eight cell blocks; cell space covers 6 acres (2.4 ha) for an average of 0.6 square metres (6.5 sq ft) of space per prisoner. The prison is surrounded by nineteen guard towers,^[17] two sets of 3-meter-tall (9.8 ft) and 60-centimeter-thick (24 in) walls covered in barbed

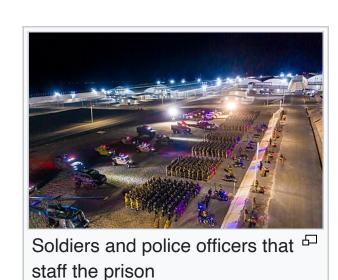


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wire, two sets of electrified fences, and gravel flooring designed to make footsteps audible.^{[18][19]}

The 256 cells can house an average of 156 inmates.^[19] The cells are equipped with four levels metal bunks with no mattresses or sheets,^[20] two toilets, and two washing basins.^{[18][19][21]} The cells are lit by artificial lights 24 hours per day. Each cell is provided with two Bibles. CCTV cameras and armed guards monitor each cell.^[18] Solitary confinement cells can hold prisoners for up to fifteen days and are only furnished with a concrete bed, a toilet, and a wash basin. The solitary cells are pitch black except for one small hole in the ceiling that allows some light inside. [22]



External videos

alleged Tren de Aragua members 🖉

March 2025 arrival of 238

CECOT is staffed by 600 soldiers and 250 police officers,^[16] and Belarmino García is the prison's director.^[23] Prison staff are provided recreational areas such as a dining hall, break room, and

gym.^{[17][24]} All individuals entering the prison are searched both physically and using X-ray scanners.^[18] Medical staff are present on site and administer all aid to prisoners within the prison's confines.^[22]

Inmates [edit]

As of 11 June 2024, CECOT has a population of 14,532 inmates.^[25] The Salvadoran government does not frequently announce how many prisoners are incarcerated at CECOT; only a few public announcements of prisoner transfers have occurred since the prison opened.^[19] In November 2024, García estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 inmates were housed at CECOT.^[22] Additionally, the criteria for becoming incarcerated in CECOT is unclear^[19] other than it will house "high ranking" gang members.^[20] Members of rival gangs are not separated; individuals with different gang affiliations are mixed together. García has described those imprisoned at CECOT as "the worst of the worst".^[22]

Prisoners are only allowed outside their cells for 30 minutes of exercise, Bible study,^[22] to attend online court hearings within the prison, or to be placed into solitary confinement. Prisoners are not allowed outside recreation, visitations, or phone calls.^[19] Prisoners are provided meals of rice, beans, eggs, and pasta, but utensils are not provided as the prison's administrations believes that they could potentially become weapons.^[20] The Salvadoran government does not plan to release any prisoner from CECOT^[19] and Minister of Justice and Public Security Gustavo Villatoro has stated that prisoners incarcerated at CECOT would never return to their communities.^[26] Villatoro also ruled out rehabilitation programs for CECOT's inmates.^[22]

Detention of foreign prisoners [edit]

See also: Immigration policy of the second Donald Trump administration § Use of El Salvador, and Deportation of illegal immigrants in the second presidency of Donald Trump

On 3 February 2025, Bukele met with United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio and offered to accept "dangerous American [convicted] criminals" and incarcerate them at CECOT "in exchange for a fee".^[27] Rubio described Bukele's offer as the "most unprecedented and extraordinary migratory agreement anywhere in the world".^[28]

On 15 March 2025, the United States announced that it would deport 300 alleged gang members of Tren de Aragua to El Salvador to be imprisoned in CECOT using the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador, the Donald Trump administration will pay the Salvadoran government US\$6 million for the 300 to be held for one year "pending the United States' decision on their long term disposition".^[29] James Boasberg, the chief judge of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, blocked the deportations from proceeding, but 238 alleged Tren de Aragua members and 23 MS-13 members were deported;^[21] one of the three deportation flights departed the United States after Boasberg blocked the deportations, causing controversy over whether the Trump administration ignored a court order.^[30]

Bukele published a 3-minute video to X (Twitter) showing the arrival of the prisoners.^[31] The Venezuelan government condemned the deportation, and Jorge Rodríguez, the president of the National Assembly of Venezuela, stated that the government would "not rest [...] until they rescue the kidnapped [Venezuelans] in El Salvador" ("*no vamos a descansar [...] hasta que rescatemos a los secuestrados en El Salvador*").^[32]

Media coverage [edit]

Salvadoran government [edit]

On 1 February 2023, Bukele posted a video to Twitter of him, General Director of Penal Centers Osiris Luna Meza, Director of the National Civil Police Mauricio Arriaza Chicas, Minister of National Defense René Merino Monroy, and Minister of Public Works Romeo Herrera touring CECOT before its opening.^{[33][34]} Later that month, he posted another video showing 2,000 prisoners with all shaved heads and wearing only white gym shorts being transferred into the prison.^[35] Bukele published similar videos for prisoner transfers in March 2023,^[36] June 2024,^[37] and March 2025.^[31]

Bukele himself has labeled CECOT as "the most criticized prison in the world" ("*la cárcel más criticada del mundo*").^[38] Villatoro has remarked that CECOT represents "the biggest monument to justice we have ever built".^[19]

International press [edit]

Several foreign news outlets chronicled CECOT's first prison transfer including the BBC,^[39] *The New York Times*,^[40] and *The Washington Post*.^[41] Several online commentators also reported on the transfer.^[42]

The Associated Press' Marcos Alemán described CECOT as the "crown jewel" of the Salvadoran gang crackdown.^[24] DW Español's María Santacecilia described CECOT as the "emblem of Bukele's iron fist" ("*emblema de la mano dura de Bukele*").^[43] *El País*' Juan Diego Quesada referred to CECOT as "the Alcatraz of Central America".^[18] CECOT has also been referred to as a "mega-prison".^{[17][26][37][41]}

The Salvadoran government has offered new outlets access to tour CECOT. In September 2023, Colombian news outlet *Noticias Caracol* became the first new outlet allowed to enter CECOT.^[44] Since then, other news outlets have been granted access to CECOT such as the BBC^[20] and CNN.^[22] YouTubers have also been granted access to CECOT.^{[43][45]} García has stated that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not allowed inside CECOT.^[20]

Allegations of human rights abuses [edit]



From left to right, Minister of Defense René Merino Monroy, Director of Penal Centers Osiris Luna Meza, President Nayib Bukele, Minister of Public Works Romeo Herrera, and Director of the National Civil Police Mauricio Arriaza Chicas touring CECOT.

External videos

Solution Navib Bukele and his government
 Solution officials touring CECOT in January
 2023. ☑

February 2023 prisoner transfer ∠
March 2023 prisoner transfer ∠
June 2024 prisoner transfer ∠

Critics of CECOT have referred to it as a "black hole of human rights".^[20] The BBC has indicated that CECOT does not adhere to the Red Cross' international standard that recommends that each prisoner receives at least 3.4 square meters (37 sq ft) of space in a cell; CECOT on average gives prisoners 0.6 square meters (6.5 sq ft) of space.^[19] Martin Horn, a former administrator of the Rikers Island prison in the United States, stated that 40,000 prisoners is "too many to manage in one place [...] under any circumstances", referring to the prison's listed capacity.^[17] There are not enough bunks for every prisoner assigned to each cell;^[24] when the BBC asked García what the maximum capacity of each cell was, he replied that "where you can fit 10 people, you can fit 20".^[20]

The BBC has also indicated that prisoners are deprived of rights such as outside recreation and family visitation outlined by international guidelines.^[19] Juan Carlos Sánchez, a program officer of the Due Process of Law Foundation, raised concern of the quality of food served at CECOT. He also questioned the status of due process as the prison incarcerated both convicted criminals and individuals on trial for their alleged crimes. He alerts that prisoners could become "sick physically, mentally" and "come out with rage".^[22] Antonio Durán, a senior judge in Zacatecoluca, said that the conditions in CECOT amount to "torture".^[19] Zaira Navas, a legal advisor at the Cristosal NGO, that it is difficult to monitor conditions inside CECOT and that conditions "might become inhumane and degrading because no-one has access to that prison".^[19] Amnesty International raised concerns that CECOT "could threaten human rights" ("*podría amenazar DD.HH*") and that the prison represented "politics of mass incarceration" ("*política de encarcelamiento masivo*").^[46]

Miguel Sarre, a former member of the United Nations Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture, described CECOT as a "concrete and steel pit" used to "dispose of people without formally applying the death penalty", citing that the government does not intend to release the prison's inmates.^[20] Kavan Applegate, the chairman of the International Corrections and Prisons Association's design committee, remarked that CECOT is "warehousing" people. Gustavo Fondevila, a professor of law at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching, described CECOT as a "political campaign project, the typical campaign project of pure, hard penal populism".^[17]

In response to criticism of alleged human rights abuses, García told CNN that "much has been said about CECOT and human rights violations, but you are seeing everything we do — medical assistance, ensuring they follow due process [...] the whole operation is based on strict respect for human rights".^[22] On 12 September 2023, the Supreme Court of Justice and the Legislative Assembly approved a provision that allowed courts in Usulután and Cojutepeque — known as surveillance courts — to monitor the rights of individuals imprisoned in CECOT.^[47]

Influence on other prisons [edit]

On 1 June 2023, Bukele announced that he would build a prison similar to CECOT for white-collar criminals as a part of a "war against corruption".^[48] Bukele stated that the prison would be known as the Corruption Confinement Center (CECOC) (Spanish: *Centro de Confinamiento de la Corrupción*).^[49]

Politicians across Latin America in countries such as Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, and Peru have implemented or have called for security policies similar to those implemented by Bukele.^{[50][51]} Before the 2023 Guatemalan presidential election, National Unity of Hope candidate Sandra Torres stated that she would build two mega-prisons to "end the scourge of homicides, murders and extortions in our country", while Valor candidate Zury Ríos promised to set up at least three new prisons, stating that she "admire[s] the public security policies [Bukele] has done".^[52] In January 2024, Ecuadorian president Daniel Noboa announced that he would build two prisons with a capacity for 12,000 inmates each and that they would be modeled on CECOT.^[53] In June 2024, Honduran president Xiomara Castro announced that she would build a prison capable of holding 20,000 inmates modeled on CECOT.^[54]

See also [edit]

Crime in El Salvador

Notes [edit]

- a. Also referred to as the Center for the Confinement of Terrorism from the direct Spanish translation.
- b. ^ The 18th Street gang is composed of two rival factions: Barrio 18 Revolucionarios and Barrio 18 Sureños.^[3]

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