



Outsourcing Responsibility: The Trouble with Third-Country Deportations

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Abstract

The developing trend of third-country deportations reflects a shifting approach to migration, one driven more by deflection than resolution. The deportations pushed by the United States have significant gaps in transparency, legality, and accountability. Through a combination of diplomacy and coercion, the US is placing an undue burden on developing countries. Beyond the immediate humanitarian risks, it is creating an environment that normalises developed countries' outsourcing their responsibility. In doing so, the US is undermining international norms, shifting migration crises, and potentially changing global alliances.

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Analysis

International Migration and Conventions

As migration flows rise worldwide, driven by conflict and climate change, developed nations are seeking ways to minimise their responsibility and strain. One increasingly seen trend is “third-country deportation,” in which migrants are sent to another country for processing, repatriation or indefinite holding, effectively outsourcing responsibility.

The United States (US) has started mass deportations of migrants to third countries, and it is likely setting a precedent that other developed countries can build on. While third-country deportation is not new, traditional practices have usually been individualised and based on safe third-country agreements. The current US approach differs in scale and lack of procedural safeguards.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol make up the foundation of international law regarding refugees and asylum seekers. These conventions centre on non-refoulement, access to fair and efficient asylum procedures, the protection of refugees’ fundamental rights, and the principle of international responsibility-sharing among states, particularly developed countries. They emphasise that developed countries cannot externalise or offload asylum processing onto developing nations.

Therefore, third-country deportations or processing is a loophole. As it is not safe for the immigrant/refugee or asylum seeker to be sent to their home country, a third country will hold them for processing, where they might remain for extended periods. Third countries do not always have adequate asylum systems, and often people end up stateless or back in the migration system.

By no means is the US the first developed country to try and avoid its international obligations towards refugees. This is exactly what the United Kingdom (UK) tried to achieve in 2022 in an agreement with Rwanda. The deal was to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing and resettlement, but the plan was halted after widespread criticism and a 2023 UK Supreme Court ruling that deemed Rwanda unsafe for refugees.

The European Union (EU), Australia, the US, Denmark, Israel, Italy and Spain all have a form of proposal or agreement in place with developing nations to detain or process asylum seekers. The EU has put forth a proposal for so-called ‘return hubs’ where those without legal right to remain in the EU are sent to third countries to be integrated or repatriated. The focus is on the non-refoulement section of the conventions, but there is less regard for sharing in the responsibility.

Trump’s Third Country Deportations

Trump’s third-country deportations mark a new phase in migration externalisation, one that combines mass application, minimal oversight, and broad disregard for individual circumstances. Undocumented migrants make up the largest portion; however, they also include people waiting for asylum hearings or who have been granted asylum.

The United States Supreme Court has gone back and forth on the legality of deporting migrants to non-citizen countries. Ultimately, the Trump administration has deported a large number of migrants to third countries.

The US has deported migrants to Panama, Costa Rico, El Salvador, Ghana, South Sudan and eSwatini. Uganda, Rwanda, Benin, Angola and Equatorial Guinea are reportedly in talks with Washington to accept deportees.



There are serious concerns regarding the violation of human rights, the conditions and the ethics of such deportations. In many cases, these deportations occur without due process or legal representation. The deportees are reportedly held in prisons, detention camps or solitary confinement. Arbitrary detention is one of the key concerns; third-country deportations have been called forced disappearances.

Africa

Across Africa, several flights have arrived with small batches of deportees. The first flights from the US arrived in July 2025, eSwatini received five individuals, and South Sudan received eight. The nationalities included people from Cuba, Laos and Vietnam, among others. In September, fourteen West African nationals arrived in Ghana. In October, eSwatini received a second flight of deportees.

eSwatini, Ghana and South Sudan have made efforts to repatriate some of the individuals. In each country, there are a number of individuals unaccounted for. In eSwatini, the deportees are held by the correctional services while awaiting repatriation. The first batch of migrants was said to be convicts of serious crimes, which contradicts reports that eSwatini refuses to take criminals convicted of violent or serious offences. The identities of the second set of individuals are unknown. However, reportedly, their legal representation has not been able to contact them.

In Ghana, upon arrival, the deportees were detained in a military camp. Several deportees were repatriated, while the rest were dropped off on the streets in Togo, without passports or having gone through official border crossings. Eight of the fourteen West Africans fear persecution and torture in their home countries.

South Sudan has repatriated at least two men, one from Mexico; the exact whereabouts of the others is unknown.

South America

Larger numbers of deportees have been sent to South America. In Costa Rica, hundreds of deportees were held in detention facilities or holding sites. In Panama, the deportees were held in a remote camp; some have been released, others may still be held there. 200 Venezuelans said by the US to be members of a Venezuelan gang were sent to El Salvador, where they are held in a maximum security prison. Later reports indicate they are likely not connected to gangsterism.

Third Country Options

Third countries are faced with four options once the migrants arrive: indefinite detention, repatriation, deportation or integration.

Indefinite detention is a very grim option and costly for the host country. It is unlikely that this can be a long-term solution. There are many logistical and financial constraints. The international human rights violations of indefinite detention alone should be a deterrent.

The majority of the countries have stated that **repatriation** is the end goal, and some individuals have been repatriated. However, if the US is treating third-country deportations as a return hub, the current method is inefficient. Why would a Mexican man be sent to South Sudan from the US? Mexico is a lot closer to the US than South Sudan is to Mexico. Furthermore, the lack of transparency surrounding the deportations, detention and eventual repatriation undermines the intention.



Ghana has repatriated some individuals; however, there are reports of **illegal deportation**. Deportees dropped off on the streets of Togo is not a viable solution. There are many concerns with this option, including statelessness, trafficking, international law, and continued burden shifting.

Rwanda is the only country that has expressly stated **integration** is its goal for receiving deportees. Rwanda is an interesting case compared to the other countries, with a relatively low population and a low unemployment rate. It may be beneficial for Rwanda to integrate individuals.

Rwanda is the only country that would truly be abiding by a third-country agreement of integrating, protecting and giving deportees work opportunities. Yet in the 2022 deal with the UK, it was ruled that Rwanda would not be a safe country to accept refugees¹.

Integration on the surface is a viable solution; however, there are caveats to this. The deportees have not chosen to be integrated into Rwandan society; they do not have connections or support in the country. They likely do not speak the language. There is a large risk of exploitation. This should not be done en masse.

Reasons for accepting deportees

These arrangements blur the line between diplomacy and coercion, combining financial incentives, political pressure, and threats of sanctions or travel bans. The countries that have accepted deportees are attempting to gain favour from Trump. There seem to be benefits from working with the US; however, in reality, these countries are not gaining new benefits but regaining some previously existing measures that Trump retracted at the start of his presidency. Reportedly, in June 2025, the [State Department](#) instructed diplomats to tell countries being considered for travel bans, mostly in Africa, that “they might be able to stay off the list if they agreed to take deportees who are not their citizens.”

African countries are attempting to negotiate lifting the visa and travel bans, or better tariff rates. Under Trump tariffs, eSwatini was hit with a 10% tariff; however, it was reported in August, after the deportees arrived, that eSwatini was one of the countries [exempted](#) from the tariffs. Additionally, some reports say eSwatini will receive \$5.1 million in exchange for accepting 160 deportees. The money is earmarked for upgrades to the migration and border management. In South Sudan’s case, the US is their largest aid donor, which, along with other diplomatic measures such as lifting sanctions and remaining off the travel ban list, is a significant reason to agree to accepting deportees.

Many Ghanaians may disagree on the ethics of accepting deportees, but have stated that keeping positive relations with the US is more important.

The South American agreements are more explicit in terms of financial incentive, with El Salvador reportedly receiving USD \$6 million; in other cases, it is pure intimidation and threats, such as with Panama, where the US threatened to retake the Panama Canal if deportees were not accepted.

Some countries have refused to accept any deportees. [Nigeria](#), when pressured with visa restrictions and additional tariffs for aligning with BRICS, stated they cannot accept deportees as they already have 230 million

¹ A later agreement with extra measures and legal processes decided that Rwanda was safe; however, a change in the UK government ended the agreement.



people and enough problems of their own. Nigeria has a stronger economy than some other African countries, as well as gas and minerals that the US needs. Nigeria has more leverage to decline deportees.

Deportees' Human Rights Violations

There are serious concerns regarding the treatment of the deportees, including torture, abuse and neglect. [Amnesty International](#) has condemned these third-country deportations, stating the US is violating Human Rights.

There is a lack of transparency with these deportations, as well as the conditions and future of these people. Many of the deportees are left in legal limbo. These people are sent to countries where they have no connections, no support system, and often do not speak the language. Some have been repatriated; others are detained indefinitely. These people are effectively stateless.

Trump's Triumphs?

Third-country deportations are a way for Trump to get rid of the 'unwanted' migrants; however, it is stretching the bounds of international law to its limit. He is not directly refouling migrants. But at the same time, in many instances, the US is purely outsourcing detention; some have called it his global gulag search. The legality of the US's actions is questionable; experts have called third-country deportations a grey area.

There are clear short-term financial and economic incentives for the US. In the US, it costs [USD \\$ 152](#) per day to detain an individual, which is \$ 60 000 a year. The US allegedly paid El Salvador \$ 6 million to detain 238 individuals for a year, compared to \$ 14.2 million to detain 238 people for a year within the US.

While the economic benefits are clear, there will be long-term reputational damage to the US as well as consequences due to deporting a substantial portion of its blue-collar workforce. The US under Trump has considerably strained their international relationships, and the world order is shifting away from the US.

Global power is shifting, there is a growing anti-Western and anti-US sentiment, and groups like BRICS are gaining traction and new members and partner states.

The US's behaviour and stances on world issues are a growing concern for citizens and countries globally. These third-country deportations add to the shift away from the US. The US's America First policies and actions are directly contributing to what is likely to be the downfall of US hegemony. China has been challenging that power for a long time, and the US is driving countries to China and non-Western blocs.

Scrutiny and Backlash

The US is not the only country under scrutiny; those accepting deportees are as well. International organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have criticised both the US and the receiving countries.

The Ghanaian government is reportedly being sued by some of the deportees, as well as by a civil rights group. Human rights activists are taking the eSwatini government to court, claiming the deal is unconstitutional.

There is much to be said about the African countries that agree to receive these deportees; however, there is a considerable power imbalance between the US and the receiving countries, so while they, too, have agency to choose not to, the threat or reality of not accepting deportees could be worse.



The US is doing these third-country deportations with a fair amount of ease and very little international (Western) condemnation. This is once again an instance of the US flouting international norms and laws with little to no repercussions. Western countries have not condemned the US.

The US has historically been influential, and while there may be a general disregard toward Trump, these anti-immigration actions could influence the attitudes and policies of other countries in the Global North dealing with migrant or refugee crises. The stage is being set for other developed countries to shift the responsibility to developing countries.

Final Thoughts

Migration is going to get worse, economic inequality, regional conflicts, and climate change are not being addressed. You cannot solve immigration by looking at the point where it impacts you. The developed world has and continues to contribute to the destabilisation and climate change that is causing people to migrate.

Transferring migrants and refugees to developing countries, which already face strained resources and challenges, merely shifts a problem created by developed nations out of sight and out of mind, once again placing an undue burden on these countries. A reasonable and sustainable solution needs to be found by the international community.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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