

U.S. senator says Kilmar Abrego Garcia was traumatized in El Salvador after mistaken deportation



Maryland Sen. Chris Van Hollen, right, speaks with Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran citizen

who was living in Maryland and deported to El Salvador by the Trump administration, in a hotel restaurant in San Salvador

Washington, April 20 (RHC)-- The dispute over the wrongful deportation and imprisonment of Kilmar Abrego Garcia "is not only about one man" but about Donald Trump's disregard of the American judicial system as well, Sen. Chris Van Hollen said Friday as he returned from a three-day trip to El Salvador to press for the detained man's release.

Speaking to reporters just after landing back in the United States, Van Hollen offered few answers about what will come next in Abrego Garcia's case. But the Maryland Democrat said that he and others will keep speaking out after the Trump administration defied court orders to facilitate his return to the United States and insisted that he would stay in El Salvador — even as officials acknowledged an "error" in deporting him.

"It's about protecting the constitutional rights of everybody who resides in the United States," Van Hollen said at Washington Dulles International Airport at a news conference with Abrego Garcia's supporters behind him. "It's very clear that the president, Trump administration, are blatantly, flagrantly disagreeing with, defying the order from the Supreme Court."

Standing next to him, Abrego Garcia's wife, Jennifer, wiped away tears as the senator shared her husband's comments about missing his family.

Much uncertainty remains about the future of Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran citizen who was living in Maryland, after Van Hollen was presented with a carefully staged opportunity to meet with him in El Salvador on Thursday. The Maryland senator said that Abrego Garcia reported he'd been moved from a notorious Salvadoran mega-prison, CECOT, to a detention center with better conditions

Abrego Garcia's status after Van Hollen left was not known, and there was no indication that Van Hollen's trip pushed him any closer to release.

The case has become a focal point in the national immigration debate. Democrats insist that President Donald Trump is overstepping his executive authority and disrespecting the courts; Republicans are criticizing Democrats for defending a man Trump and White House officials claim is an MS-13 gang member, despite the fact that he has not been charged with any gang-related crimes.

Van Hollen said that Abrego Garcia told him that he'd shared a cell with 25 prisoners and was afraid of many fellow inmates at CECOT before he was moved to another center in Santa Ana, El Salvador. He said that Abrego Garcia reported being treated well — but noted that they were surrounded by government minders at the time.

Democrats are pushing, Republicans aren't budging

The fight over Abrego Garcia is the latest partisan flashpoint as Democrats struggle to break through and push back during the opening few months of Trump's second administration.

More Democratic lawmakers have said they will fly to El Salvador to push for Abrego Garcia's release, but the partisan pressure has yielded no results. President Donald Trump and El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, have only dug in on keeping him out of the United States. That stance remained even after the U.S. Supreme Court called on the administration to facilitate his return.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt has said that Abrego Garcia will "never live in the United States of America again."

The Maryland senator held a news conference at Washington Dulles International Airport on Friday upon his return from El Salvador, where he told reporters that he met with Abrego Garcia for more than 30 minutes, and informed him of the national attention on his case, which the senator said Abrego Garcia was unaware of.

"His conversation with me was the first communication he'd had with anybody outside of prison since he was abducted," Van Hollen said. "He said he felt very sad about being in a prison because he had not committed any crimes."

Van Hollen told reporters that Abrego Garcia has "experienced trauma," and framed his deportation as an "illegal abduction."

The U.S. senator said that Bukele posted images of Van Hollen's meeting with Abrego Garcia on Thursday and said that the prisoner "gets the honor of staying in El Salvador's custody." Van Hollen said a Salvadoran government official placed other beverages on the table with salt or sugar on the rim to make it appear they were drinking margaritas. Van Hollen said neither he nor Abrego Garcia drank from the glasses, which in the photo Bukele posted were garnished with cherries.

After days of denying that he knew much about Abrego Garcia, Trump on Friday said he knew Abrego Garcia's prison record was "unbelievably bad" and called him an "illegal alien" and a "foreign terrorist."

The president also responded Friday with a social media post saying Van Hollen "looked like a fool yesterday standing in El Salvador begging for attention."

[SOURCE: ASSOCIATED PRESS]

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