

Trapped in Danger: Trump Administration Policies Endanger Persecuted LGBTQI+ People

LGBTQI+ people at risk of persecution have been effectively trapped in dangerous and life-threatening conditions due to a barrage of Trump administration executive orders. These orders are at odds with laws enacted by Congress to protect people fleeing persecution and treaties the United States has pledged to uphold. The administration's refusal to uphold U.S. refugee resettlement and asylum laws that have provided vital lifelines for people fleeing persecution has left people targeted due to their sexual orientation or gender identity facing dire and escalating dangers.

These lifesaving protections — asylum and refugee resettlement — must be restored.

Stranded and Blocked from Refugee Resettlement

On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued an [executive order](#) suspending the U.S. refugee resettlement program. The administration subsequently issued stop work orders and other directives that halted resettlement processing, including for refugees already approved for U.S. resettlement. These actions left vulnerable and displaced queer and trans individuals stranded in dangerous and life-threatening conditions. LGBTQI+ people who have fled persecution face particular challenges in accessing humanitarian protection due to a range of barriers including threats to their safety if their sexual orientation or gender identity is disclosed. While freezing resettlement for at-risk refugees, the Trump administration launched a very public, and much-[criticized](#), initiative to resettle white South African Afrikaners, descendants of Dutch and French settlers.

In addition to the overall resettlement freeze, President Trump's halting of resettlement included Welcome Corps, which had provided an urgently needed opportunity to overcome some of these barriers so that a number of at-risk LGBTQI+ refugees could access U.S. resettlement. Rainbow Railroad had submitted applications for 10 individuals to be resettled to the U.S. through Welcome Corps. These refugees would have otherwise been unable to access a resettlement pathway.

Some refugees who have escaped persecution in their home countries will now be left stranded for much longer in neighboring countries where they also face constant risks of violence and persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. For instance, 61 vulnerable queer and trans refugees and family members referred by Rainbow Railroad and Immigration Equality to the U.S. refugee program were left stranded in gravely dangerous conditions even though many of them had approved refugee applications and were merely awaiting final medical clearance or travel to the United States.

These vulnerable queer and trans refugees include:

- **A lesbian couple from Afghanistan who remain at high risk in Pakistan due to the pause on U.S. refugee resettlement.** In Afghanistan, LGBTQI+ persons face life-threatening persecution. The couple fled Afghanistan due to Taliban threats. One of them is a female journalist. Not only would the couple face persecution in Afghanistan, but as two women who are in a romantic relationship, they are also not safe in Pakistan, where same-sex sexual activity is illegal and most women their age are married. Immigration Equality referred them for refugee resettlement to the United States in 2024, and their cases were approved. Now, due to the U.S. resettlement freeze, they remain in Pakistan and are at constant risk of deportation back to life threatening danger as the Pakistani government escalates its mass expulsions of refugees to Afghanistan.
- **A transgender Somali woman named Camilla who was murdered in an apparent anti-trans attack as she waited for her U.S. resettlement case to be processed.** Camilla, an aspiring make-up artist, grew up in Kenya where she was brutally persecuted throughout her life because of her gender identity. She had recently escaped from a “rehabilitation” or forced conversion center in Kenya after spending six years imprisoned there where her captors tried to “fix” her gender identity. While imprisoned, she was beaten, burned, and repeatedly raped. Even after she escaped, she faced further violence and threats because of her gender identity, but the authorities do not protect trans people from persecution in Kenya. Immigration Equality referred her case to the United States for resettlement in 2024. But as she was preparing for her approaching resettlement interview with the U.S. government the U.S. resettlement program was paused in January of 2025. Immigration Equality learned shortly thereafter that Camilla had been brutally murdered.
- **A gay Ugandan refugee has been left in limbo in Kenya—without safety or answers—due to the Trump administration’s suspension of the U.S. refugee resettlement program.** The young man had fled Uganda in 2016 at age 21 after it became too dangerous to live openly as a queer person. Seeking refuge in Kenya, he instead found daily survival marked by systemic discrimination, threats and abuse. As an LGBTQI+ refugee in Kenya, he was evicted four times by landlords due to his identity, was harassed by police during a raid on an LGBTQI+ shelter, suffered physical, verbal, and online abuse, and struggled to access healthcare. The Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration (ORAM) assisted him and others in his safe house to find jobs and economic opportunities. He was referred to the U.S. resettlement program, had completed most of the steps in the process, and was told to expect relocation to Ohio in December 2024 or February 2025. But, as he recounted to ORAM, when he arrived for his final appointment in March 2025, he was told his case was on hold. Since then, he has received no updates on his case. He had already quit his job to prepare for departure, and now faces both emotional and financial crises. The delays have had a profound impact on his mental health and his dreams of reuniting with his partner of 12 years—now a U.S. citizen—and of living a life free from fear.

- **A stateless transgender woman in Saudi Arabia now stranded in grave danger because of the pause on the U.S. refugee resettlement program.** She had been previously imprisoned by the Saudi government and been a victim of both torture and rape. Immigration Equality referred her case for refugee resettlement in 2024. Around December of 2024, her boyfriend was arrested because of their romantic relationship. Shortly thereafter, her case was approved for resettlement to the United States and her travel was initially scheduled for mid-January 2025. However, because of a technical issue with her travel documents, she was not able to travel before the Trump administration paused all refugee resettlement. She remains in hiding in Saudi Arabia, living in fear that she will be arrested again at any time. Her boyfriend is still in prison. She has no money for basic necessities and recently lost her housing.

The risks LGBTQI+ refugees face are only heightened by massive U.S. humanitarian aid cuts. As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees [explained](#) on May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, “the global impact of cuts to humanitarian funding now threatens our capacity to ensure the safety and well-being of those threatened by violence and persecution, including LGBTQI+ people.”

Punished and Banned for Seeking Asylum

Under U.S. law, a person who enters the United States at or between U.S. ports of entry who expresses a fear of return or an intent to apply for asylum must be provided the opportunity to apply for asylum or at least be referred to a credible fear screening interview with an asylum officer. Congress enacted these requirements to comply with U.S. obligations under the Refugee Convention and its Protocol, which prohibit return to potential persecution.

On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued a [Proclamation](#) that unlawfully suspends asylum processing at the U.S. southern border and denies asylum and other legal protections to people who enter the United States at the border. Since January, the Department of Homeland Security has used this Proclamation to automatically deny access to asylum and [expel or remove](#) families and adults fleeing Afghanistan, Ghana, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Uzbekistan and many other countries. On March 15, President Trump [invoked](#) the wartime powers of the notorious Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to pull people seeking asylum and civil immigration detainees out of lawful immigration processes in the United States and deliver them to a prison system in El Salvador where the [U.S. government has described](#) conditions as life-threatening.

Through these and other actions, the Trump administration has used a pattern of enforced disappearances to detain, remove, and expel countless asylum seekers, without any assessment of their asylum claims, in stark violation of U.S. law and international legal obligations. Under these policies, LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum have been unlawfully prevented from seeking asylum in the United States and unlawfully “disappeared” and sent to foreign prisons and detention facilities.

These queer and trans refugees include:

- **Andry José Hernández Romero, a gifted Venezuelan makeup artist who was seeking asylum from persecution related to his sexual orientation and political beliefs, was awaiting his asylum hearing in the United States but was taken by the Trump administration and flown to the notorious Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) prison in El Salvador, as his attorneys at the Immigrant Defenders Law Center have [recounted](#). Andry fled Venezuela after violent threats to his safety, entered the United States by crossing the border, and then learned how to enter through the CBP One application. Andry was immediately put into immigration detention in San Diego, California because of his tattoos which say “Mom” and “Dad” with crowns on top of the words. The government claimed the crown symbol was an identifier for the Tren de Aragua gang – a claim that experts on the gang have debunked. In March 2025, Andry was forcibly sent to the CECOT maximum-security prison in El Salvador under the Alien Enemies Act, without due process and without prior knowledge. People held there are denied the right to contact family or legal counsel. Two days prior to this flight, Andry had an asylum hearing and the government failed to bring him to the hearing.**
- **A Russian asylum seeker fleeing persecution on the basis of his sexual orientation and political opinion was denied a fear screening when he sought U.S. asylum and was instead unlawfully sent to Panama the next day, as he recounted to [Human Rights First and Refugees International](#). After he fled Russia, where he had been beaten by the police and threatened with detention, he sought asylum in the United States in February 2025. He repeatedly told officers in English that he was seeking asylum but had difficulty communicating because there was no interpretation provided. Officers did not respond to his requests for asylum and sent him to Panama without a fear screening, with no opportunity to make a phone call, and without telling him where he was being taken or giving him any paperwork.**
- **A gay man who fled persecution in Guatemala, and had been granted U.S. protection from return to Guatemala, was sent to Mexico without due process despite his fears of harm there, as [press accounts](#) of court documents report. An immigration court order prohibited his return to Guatemala. But, in the wake of Trump administration policies, and just a couple of days after the immigration court issued its order, U.S. officers put him on a bus and sent him to Mexico. Mexico returned the man to Guatemala, where he is living in hiding and in constant fear. A federal judge concluded that the removal lacked any semblance of due process and ordered the U.S. government to facilitate his return.**

- U.S. officers denied an asylum hearing to “Maria,” a lesbian woman who had suffered persecution in her country for her sexual orientation and political opinion, and U.S. officers threatened to continue inflicting pain on her if her partner did not agree to self-deport. In her home country, “Maria” (a pseudonym to protect her identity) was civilly prosecuted, interrogated, and threatened with imprisonment by the police, as reported by Immigration Equality. Yet in the wake of the Trump administration’s Proclamation suspending asylum, Maria was denied access to asylum and deemed to have failed the [flawed](#) and [deficient](#) Convention Against Torture screening provided to some under the Proclamation. According to Maria, U.S. officers informed her that she would be imminently deported, which would have separated her from her wife, who was also detained and seeking asylum. Afraid for her life, Maria refused to leave and was violently abused and restrained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers. She explained to her attorney: “I felt like my jaw was going to break. But screaming in pain didn’t stop the officer; on the contrary, he pressed even harder.” Maria’s wife was forced to listen to her screams and was told by an officer that if she agreed to self-deport, “they would stop causing [Maria] pain.” Maria sustained injuries and was treated by detention medical staff. Her wife later passed her Convention Against Torture screening and is awaiting a hearing.

While some federal courts have issued orders limiting some of these policies at least temporarily, the damage to human lives and human rights that has been inflicted already, and will be inflicted should and as these and similar policies continue, is staggering.

Recommendations

U.S. leaders at every level of government should uphold the rights of refugees and asylum seekers including:

- The Trump administration must rescind and reverse its unlawful policies that endanger LGBTQI+ and other refugees. These policies include the refugee resettlement ban, Proclamation suspending access to asylum, misuse of the flawed “Aliens Enemies Act,” and any other policies that ban access to asylum or unlawfully send people to other countries. The Trump administration should restore the U.S. resettlement program, and resume [Welcome Corps](#), a program that leverages the support and commitment of private citizens. The administration must also reverse its illegal Executive Orders and related policies that punish and discriminate against trans, non-binary, and intersex people by seeking to erase their identity.
- Members of Congress must do all they can to press the administration to comply with the laws enacted by Congress and the treaties the U.S. has pledged to uphold, and restore and protect vital life-saving asylum and refugee resettlement.
- State and local elected officials must take steps to uphold the human rights of, and enact and uphold laws that protect the human rights of, migrants, people seeking asylum and members of the LGBTQI+ community.