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Dear Ministers,

## **RE: USE OF SHANNON AIRPORT AS A REFUELING STOPOVER FOR US IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE) REMOVAL FLIGHTS**

We write with concern about information that Shannon Airport in Shannon, Ireland has been used as a refueling stopover for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deportation flights during at least five separate removal operations, involving at least 28 people. These included flights involving forced third country transfers of individuals to countries, such as South Sudan and Eswatini, where they have no ties to and where they have faced arbitrary and prolonged detention and other abuse.<sup>1</sup>

### **FLIGHT 1: HARLINGEN, TEXAS (USA) TO DJIBOUTI VIA SHANNON AIRPORT, 20-21 MAY 2025**

According to flight data gathered by ICE Flight Monitor, based at Human Rights First, aircraft N588AT (a Gulfstream V aircraft) left Harlingen, Texas (US) on 20 May 2025, made a stop in El Paso, Texas and then stopped at Shannon Airport in Shannon, Ireland.<sup>2</sup> It then continued to land at its final destination in Djibouti on 21 May 2025. The plane remained there until 24 May when it returned to the United States, stopping again en route in Shannon, Ireland.

Amnesty International and Human Rights First believe that the flight carried a group of eight men, including from Cuba, Mexico, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Sudan, several of whom were resettled as refugees to the United States. On 21 May 2025, when the plane had already left the United States, a US judge found that their deportation had violated a previous court order prohibiting the deportation of people to a third country that the government never raised as a potential country of removal

<sup>1</sup> The Irish Times, "Shannon Airport used for refuelling Ice deportation flights 10 times in past year", 9 February 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2026/02/09/shannon-airport-used-for-refuelling-ice-deportation-flights-10-times-in-past-year/>.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights First, *ICE Flight Monitor*, <https://humanrightsfirst.org/ice-flight-monitor/>.

during their immigration proceedings, without notice or opportunity to present a fear claim.<sup>3</sup> Instead of returning the men to the United States, the US government diverted the flight to Djibouti, where the men were held in a shipping container at a US military base for six weeks, until the US Supreme Court allowed the deportations to proceed and they were transferred to Juba, South Sudan on 4 July 2025.

Upon arrival, the eight men were detained by the South Sudanese authorities without legal justification. Two of them have since been released, but six remain detained after more than eight months. Their US legal representatives have not had consistent and unmonitored access to their clients. Their lawyer in Juba has not been able to obtain access and communicate with them. Amnesty International has received credible reports that they are in the custody of the National Security Service but has not independently verified the whereabouts of the men.<sup>4</sup>

## FLIGHT 2: EL PASO, TEXAS (USA) TO DJIBOUTI VIA SHANNON AIRPORT, 14 JULY 2025

According to flight data also gathered by ICE Flight Monitor, the same aircraft N588AT left El Paso, Texas, on 14 July 2025, and stopped at Shannon Airport before continuing on to Djibouti.

Amnesty International and Human Rights First believe that the flight carried a group of five men, who were then transferred to a US military aircraft and taken to Eswatini on 16 July 2025. The group included men from Cuba, Yemen, Vietnam, Laos, and Jamaica. One man has since been returned to his country of origin. The remaining four men are being held at Matsapha Correctional Complex in Matsapha, Eswatini. The authorities have yet to officially state a lawful basis for their detention. Despite numerous attempts and requests by counsel to secure confidential, in-person, unmonitored legal access to their clients, officials obstructed visits and on a later occasion proposed monitored/video-only contact, which does not meet international standards. The men have now been held for more than eight months in arbitrary detention.

On 6 October 2025, Eswatini received a second group of 10 men removed from the United States under the same opaque transfer arrangement, raising further concern about arbitrary detention and a lack of transparency in their treatment.

## FLIGHT 3: SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS (USA) TO RWANDA VIA SHANNON AIRPORT, 15 AUGUST 2025

According to data gathered by Ice Flight Monitor, on 15 August 2025 the same aircraft N588AT left San Antonio, Texas, stopping in Shannon en route to Rwanda.

Amnesty International and Human Rights First believe that the flight carried a group of seven people, transferred to Rwanda as part of a third country transfer arrangement with the US government. The nationalities and identities of the seven people remain unknown. According to a Rwandan government spokesperson, four of them would remain in Rwanda, while three would return to their countries of origin.<sup>5</sup>

Significant concerns persist regarding Rwanda's ability to protect third country migrants and asylum seekers. A 2023 Supreme Court ruling in the UK has blocked such transfers, citing Rwanda's poor human rights record and the high risk that individuals would be returned to danger in their countries of origin.<sup>6</sup>

## FLIGHT 4: PHOENIX, ARIZONA (USA) TO ISRAEL VIA SHANNON AIRPORT, 20/21 JANUARY 2026

According to ICE Flight Monitor, on the night of 20/21 January 2026 the same aircraft N588AT transported eight Palestinian men from Phoenix, Arizona, to Tel Aviv Ben Gurion Airport in Israel, stopping en route in New Jersey, Shannon, Ireland, and Sofia, Bulgaria. The same aircraft then also stopped at Shannon Airport on the return journey to the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> United States District Court, District of Massachusetts, *D.V.D., et al., v. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Memorandum on Preliminary Injunction*, 25-10676-BEM, 21 May 2025, <https://www.courtlistener.com/docket/69775896/118/dvd-v-us-department-of-homeland-security/>.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, Urgent Action: End four deportees' arbitrary detention, Index: AFR 65/0280/2025, 18 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr65/0280/2025/en/>.

<sup>5</sup> BBC News, "First deportees arrive in Rwanda from the US", 28 August 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg4xp2myovo>.

<sup>6</sup> United Kingdom Supreme Court, *AAA (Syria) & Ors, R (on the application of) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2023] UKSC 42, 15 November 2023, <https://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKSC/2023/42.html>.

According to media reports,<sup>7</sup> the eight Palestinian men on board were shackled for the entire journey by their wrists and ankles. After arriving at Ben Gurion Airport, they were put in a vehicle with an armed Israeli police officer and released at a military checkpoint outside the Palestinian town of Ni'lin in the West Bank.

## FLIGHT 5: PHOENIX, ARIZONA (USA) TO ISRAEL VIA SHANNON AIRPORT, 1/2 FEBRUARY 2026

According to the same media reports<sup>8</sup> and ICE Flight Monitor, aircraft N588AT took a second group of Palestinians from the United States to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, Israel, during the night of 1/2 February 2026, stopping at Shannon Airport. The number of passengers onboard and most of their identities remain unclear.

## THE UNITED STATES ADMINISTRATION'S ATTACK ON THE RIGHTS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS AND ITS FORCED THIRD COUNTRY REMOVALS

From its first day in office, the Trump administration has aggressively advanced an anti-migrant, anti-refugee agenda, implementing racist and xenophobic executive orders that dehumanize and criminalize migrants and people seeking safety. Nearly all federal law enforcement agencies have been deputized to engage in civil immigration enforcement. Masked agents have seized migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and US citizens; armored vehicles are patrolling streets; and agents have targeted areas near schools, faith centers, hospitals, and other previously prohibited areas for immigration enforcement. The mass immigration detention system has expanded, holding thousands of people, including families with small children, in overcrowded, inhumane facilities, sometimes on military bases; limiting access to bond; and resuming the detention and separation of families. New state-funded detention facilities have been built, such as "Alligator Alcatraz."

The Trump administration launched the largest mass delegalization effort by ending parole-based humanitarian programs and Temporary Protected Status for many nationalities. Since 20 January 2025, more than 1.5 million immigrants have either lost or will lose their temporary lawful presence, putting them at risk of deportation.

President Trump declared a national emergency at the US-Mexico border and terminated the "CBP One" mobile application's scheduling system for all migrants, including people seeking asylum. All asylum adjudications before the Department of Homeland Security have been halted, for all nationalities. The US Refugee Admissions Program was suspended. A travel ban was implemented and then expanded from 19 countries to 39, and all immigration processing was halted for those nationalities, including for individuals who hold Palestinian Authority travel documents.

The Trump administration has brazenly violated the right to due process and undermined the rule of law by unlawfully removing people and subjecting them to enforced disappearance. On 15 March 2025, more than 280 young men were sent to El Salvador in secret, with no notice to their loved ones or attorneys and transferred to CECOT, a mega-prison notorious for [torture](#). There, they were held incommunicado and tortured. Four months later, 252 of those young men were released from CECOT and sent back to Venezuela (a country that a number of the men had originally fled, fearing persecution). Many of the people removed were actively engaged in immigration proceedings, had pending asylum claims, were recognized as refugees by US officials, or had been granted protection under US law. Families received no official information, and people were removed from US government tracking systems, making it impossible for their family members or lawyers to locate them. Human Rights First and other groups assisted the families of several of the men sent to CECOT to file emergency submissions with the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances. ICE officials have since admitted "many" had no criminal record at all. These individuals were expelled without any notice or due process, and over multiple months, neither the US nor Salvadoran authorities provided any official information on the identities of the individuals expelled to El Salvador or their whereabouts. Our organizations consider that these individuals were subjected to enforced disappearances, as defined in international law.

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<sup>7</sup>The Guardian, "Revealed: Private jet owned by Trump friend used by ICE to deport Palestinians to West Bank", 5 February 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/feb/05/revealed-private-jet-owned-by-trump-friend-used-by-ice-to-deport-palestinians-to-west-bank>; +972 Magazine, "U.S. secretly deporting Palestinians to West Bank in coordination with Israel", 5 February 2026, <https://www.972mag.com/us-secretly-deporting-palestinians-ice-dezer/>.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

Third-country removals have raised additional concerns about removals without notice or opportunity to contest them, which has been the subject of litigation in *D.V.D. v. US Department of Homeland Security*. In February 2026, a U.S. district court ruled the policy unlawful.<sup>9</sup> However, the US government has appealed.

## IRELAND'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT'S MASS DEPORTATION MACHINE

Amnesty International and Human Rights First note that the Minister for Transport stated: "Stops at Irish airports, by private and commercial charters, which are technical stops for non-traffic purposes (i.e. not picking up or setting down passengers), do not require prior authorisation from my Department. My Department had no prior knowledge of the operation of these reported flights."<sup>10</sup>

While we understand that, under the 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation, civil aircraft do not require state permission to land for refueling, states are required to interpret its provisions in a manner that complies with international human rights law. With respect to its involvement in, and response to, the US government's unlawful third country removals, Ireland is obliged to take measures pursuant to its human rights obligations under international law. In the aftermath of the United States's use of civil aircraft in its 'war on terror' renditions program, with Shannon airport as a refueling stopover en route to or returning from rendition missions, the then Irish government in its 2011 Programme for Government, promised to "enforce the prohibition on the use of Irish airspace, airports and related facilities for purposes not in line with the dictates of international law". It appears that no concrete actions emerged from this commitment.

Amnesty International and Human Rights First also note that, under Irish law, the transit of weapons through the State or its airspace is prohibited unless an exemption is granted by the Minister for Transport.<sup>11</sup> The Irish Times asked the Department of Transport if the Government was aware whether or not there were US officials carrying weapons on the flights and, if so, if permission was granted. A Department statement said: "No authorisation was sought for this flight."<sup>12</sup>

## QUESTIONS

Amnesty International and Human Rights First urge all countries to deny the Trump administration's cruel and inhumane mass deportation campaign any form of facilitation, cooperation or tolerance. We would therefore be grateful if your Departments could provide the following information:

- Whether the Irish authorities had been alerted by US authorities that removal flights were due to use Irish airspace, airports or related facilities;
- Whether the Irish authorities had been alerted by US authorities that US officials carrying weapons were due to use Irish airspace, airports or related facilities, and whether relevant exemptions were requested;
- Whether the Irish authorities have requested clarification about the above-mentioned flights from their US diplomatic counterparts;

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<sup>9</sup> *D.V.D. v. U.S. Department of Homeland Security*, 1:25-cv-10676, (D. Mass. Feb 25, 2026) ECF No. 242; Human Rights First, Court Finds Trump Administration's Third-Country Removal Policy is Unlawful, Vacates the Policy, 25 February 2026, <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/court-finds-trump-administrations-third-country-removal-policy-is-unlawful-vacates-the-policy/>.

<sup>10</sup> Minister for Transport, Written answer to Question 246, Departmental Inquiries, Dáil Éireann Debate, 12 February 2026, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2026-02-12/246/>.

<sup>11</sup> Both civil and military aircraft need exemptions. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has responsibility for regulating foreign military and state aircraft. Under the Air Navigation (Foreign Military Aircraft) Order 1952, all foreign military aircraft wishing to overfly or land in Ireland require diplomatic clearance from that Minister. Clearance is subject to strict conditions, including that the aircraft is unarmed; that it carries no arms, ammunition or explosives; that it does not engage in intelligence gathering; and that the flight does not form part of a military exercise or operation. The Minister for Transport has responsibility for regulation of civil aircraft. The carriage of munitions of war on civil aircraft is regulated by the Air Navigation (Carriage of Munitions of War, Weapons and Dangerous Goods) Order 1973 (and 1989 amendments), where exemptions can be sought only for "unloaded personal issued weapons of the troops being carried on board". For decades, Ireland has permitted US military personnel to transit Shannon Airport on civil aircraft while carrying their personal unloaded weapons through what is in effect a "blanket" application of exemptions.

<sup>12</sup> The Irish Times, "Use of Shannon Airport to deport Palestinians from US 'reprehensible'", 6 February 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2026/02/06/use-of-shannon-airport-to-deport-palestinians-from-us-reprehensible/>.

- What measures Irish authorities are taking to prevent further use of Irish airspace, airports and related facilities for unlawful US third country removals;
- What measures Irish authorities are taking to assess whether any individual on board face a real risk of serious harm if transferred, or to detect any other breaches of Ireland's obligations under international human rights law.

We would be grateful if you would confirm the Irish Government position on this matter. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,



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