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# ICE has detained or deported prominent immigration activists

By Maria Sacchetti and David Weigel January 19

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has detained or deported several prominent immigrant activists across the country, prompting accusations from advocates that the Trump administration is improperly targeting political opponents.

Detention Watch Network, a nonprofit that tracks immigration enforcement, said this week that several activists have been targeted recently, including Maru Mora Villalpando in Washington state, Eliseo Jurado in Colorado, and New York immigrant leaders Jean Montrevil and Ravi Ragbir.

“They’re trying to intimidate people,” said Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-N.Y.), the ranking Democrat of the House Judiciary Committee. “These are well-known activists who’ve been here for decades, and they’re saying to them: Don’t raise your head.”

A top ICE official denied that the agency is targeting immigrants for deportation because of their activism. The agency says its priorities are immigrants who pose a threat to national and border security and public safety. Most, but not all, of the targeted immigrants have criminal records.

“U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement does not target unlawfully present aliens for arrest based on advocacy positions they hold or in retaliation for critical comments they make,” said Matthew Albence, ICE’S executive associate director for Enforcement and Removal Operations, which detains and deports immigrants. “Any suggestion to the contrary is irresponsible, speculative and inaccurate.”

The accusations come as a congressional clash on immigration policy, and after months of rising tensions between immigrant-rights activists and the Trump administration. In California, New York and Washington, governing Democrats have discouraged businesses from cooperating with ICE — part of a clash over “sanctuary status” that has been tied up in courts.

Montrevil, who was deported to Haiti on Jan. 16, came to the U.S. legally in 1986 and was ordered deported in 1994. He has multiple felony convictions related to drug possession, according to ICE. But in an interview with the radio show Democracy Now, he questioned the timing of his deportation.

“I have been under supervision for 15 years, and I’ve never violated,” Montrevil said. “I have always made my appointment. And I stay out of trouble. I have volunteered, and I work and take care of my kids. I pay taxes every year. I did everything right. Everything they asked me to do, I have done it. So why target me now?”

Ragbir, a citizen of Trinidad, was convicted in 2000 of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and later sentenced to 30 months in prison and ordered to pay $350,000 restitution. ICE said he will be detained until he can be deported.

Montrevil is a co-founder of the New Sanctuary Coalition, which advocates for immigrants, and Ragbir is the coalition’s current executive director. Ragbir has lived in the United States for more than 20 years.

“We see the last few weeks as an escalating series of actions against New Sanctuary and our leaders aimed at silencing those who speak for immigrants’ rights,” said Kirk Cheyfitz, a spokesman for the New York-based group. “All this comes as racist rhetoric from the White House leaves no doubt about the racial basis of the Trump administration’s immigration policies.”

Jurado, the 30-year-old husband of a Peruvian citizen living in a Boulder, Colo., church to avoid deportation, was arrested on Jan. 11 for being in the United States illegally. ICE said he has a 2007 driving offense in Adams County, Colo., and three misdemeanor convictions. He, too, is being detained pending a hearing before an immigration judge.

Jurado’s advocates say ICE detained him in retaliation for his wife’s public fight to avoid deportation to Peru.

Maru Mora Villalpando, a Mexican national in Washington state, said she has no criminal record and is proof that ICE is targeting activists.

“This latest tactic is something we might expect from generals in a tin-pot dictatorship, not federal officers in a 240-year-old democracy,” said Kica Matos, a spokeswoman for the Fair Immigration Reform Movement, the largest network of immigrant-rights organizations in the United States. “Arresting immigrant activists who speak up is meant to sow fear in immigrant communities and stop political protest.”

ICE mailed her a letter in December saying she may be deported. She has lived in the United States for 22 years and had met with federal officials during the Obama administration, when she helped publicize detainees’ hunger strikes and other protests in Washington state.

“There’s no way for them to know about me except for the work that I do,” she said. “I think my case makes it clear that actually Ravi and Jean’s case were politically motivated.”

ICE officials would not say how Mora Villalpando came across the agency’s radar, but said they are pursuing her deportation.

“All those in violation of the immigration laws may be subject to enforcement proceedings, up to and including removal from the United States,” the agency said in a statement.

Increasingly, Democrats are handling that information as a potential threat. Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.), an advocate for the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals program who has held a number of town halls and hearings to talk to constituents about their immigration status, worried that the reports from New York, Colorado, and Washington were part of a growing trend.

“I have long suspected that very vocal advocates were harshly targeted after they spoke out,” said Gutierrez. “I would go to a hearing, an immigration hearing, and the person who made the biggest impression? I’d find out that they’d been detained. And that started last year.”

**53 Comments**

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