

They 'Had Done Everything Right.' ICE Detained Them Anyway.

Dozens of refugees with valid status have been sent from Minnesota to Texas to be revetted, prompting a lawsuit. Those released have had to pay their way back.

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By Miriam Jordan and Hamed Aleaziz

Miriam Jordan and Hamed Aleaziz cover immigration.

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Selamawit Mehari, an Eritrean single mother of three, was starting her day when federal agents showed up at her apartment in St. Paul, Minn., on a recent morning. As her 13-year-old son wailed and her older daughter produced paperwork proving her mother was in the United States lawfully, the agents shackled Ms. Mehari and took her away.

“They didn’t explain anything,” recalled her daughter, Yosan, 21, who described the encounter to The New York Times. “We didn’t understand. We had done everything right.”

The next day, chained at the wrists, waist and ankles, Ms. Mehari, 38, was shuffling up the steps of a plane

bound for Texas, tears streaming down her face in the frigid wind.

More than 100 refugees with no criminal record from about a dozen countries have been arrested in Minnesota by immigration agents in recent weeks and flown to detention centers in Texas for interviews, according to lawyers, family members and faith leaders. At least some, including Ms. Mehari, were eventually released in Texas, leaving them to find their own way home.

The arrests, which began this month and are continuing, have sown panic among refugees in Minnesota, where thousands of agents are conducting a sweeping operation as President Trump intensifies his national immigration crackdown. Over the weekend, U.S. Border Patrol officers fatally shot a Minneapolis protester in the second killing of a demonstrator at the hands of immigration agents this month.

Before being approved for resettlement in the United States, refugees often wait years in camps and undergo extensive vetting by the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies. They arrive on flights coordinated with the U.S. government. The process is radically different from that of asylum seekers who have shown up at the border and been allowed to remain in the United States only if they win their cases in immigration court.

The Trump administration had announced early this month that it would “re-examine thousands of refugee cases through new background checks.” Officials said they would focus on people who had arrived in the United States in recent years and were yet to obtain green cards, or legal permanent residency, starting with 5,600 refugees in Minnesota.

The announcement, by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, did not say that refugees would be rounded up and jailed for the review to take place.

The dragnet has swept up refugees from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, according to lawyers and leaders of resettlement agencies that are government-funded to assist refugees in the United States. It has included Karen people from Myanmar, a persecuted Christian minority.

In response to questions from The Times about the detentions, a spokesman for Citizenship and Immigration Services, Matthew Tragesser, said in a statement that the agency “is verifying the merits of all refugee applications and ensuring no issues were overlooked.”

If it is determined during the rescreening that a refugee poses a national security or public safety concern, or committed fraud, that person will face deportation proceedings, Mr. Tragesser said, and if the refugee passes, he or she “may be granted a green card.” Mr. Tragesser did not explain why the refugees were being flown to Texas for the interviews.

Offering sanctuary to the displaced has long been a bedrock of U.S. policy, garnering bipartisan support. Refugees are typically fleeing war or persecution, without the possibility of ever returning to their home country.



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President Trump has sought to drastically cut back legal immigration in addition to purging the country of those here unlawfully. He has halted all refugee admissions except a small group including white Afrikaners from South Africa. The president has fixated on Minnesota’s Somalis, most of whom are refugees, after revelations that some individuals were involved in a multimillion-dollar social-services fraud scheme.

All refugees, once admitted to the United States, must apply for a green card within one year, but some fail to do so — sometimes because they cannot afford it or have challenges with red tape. Those who miss the

deadline retain their refugee status, and in the past were not subject to arrest or threatened with deportation.

“There has never been a systematic effort to re-examine refugees,” said Barbara Strack, a former senior refugee official who served under Republican and Democratic administrations. “There was a recognition that refugees had been highly vetted overseas before they were admitted.”

In rare instances, she said, refugee status might have been re-examined if evidence-based leads raised suspicions of fraud in the application process or criminal or national security concerns.

Early Saturday, a group of refugees represented by the International Refugee Assistance Project, Berger Montague and the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law filed a federal class-action lawsuit challenging the illegal arrest and imprisonment of resettled refugees in Minnesota.

The lawsuit said that the refugees had not been charged with crimes or with any violations of immigration statutes, and that the government was using the operation to “trigger a mass termination of refugee status” and to make refugees vulnerable to deportation.

“This goal represents an egregious and unlawful betrayal of the promise made to refugees, pursuant to the Refugee Act of 1980 to offer safety, stability and a path to a safe home,” the suit said.

The Times has reviewed court records of three refugees swept up in the arrest operation in recent weeks who were not part of the suit. In one, a Somali refugee was arrested outside his workplace in Minnesota on Jan. 14. Lawyers obtained a court order blocking his movement from Minnesota. The next day, he told his family he had been moved to El Paso. The court later ordered the government to return him to Minnesota.

Another man, from Moldova, was arrested in Minneapolis and moved to Texas on Jan. 16. He was a refugee

who entered the United States in 2023 and had applied for a green card. A federal court judge ordered his release.

The court found that the man had “submitted ample evidence in support of his refugee status and his pending adjustment application.”

“Accordingly,” the court said, “there is no lawful basis for petitioner’s detention, and the court orders his immediate release.”

In all cases reviewed by The Times, the refugees had applied for green cards.

Some refugees have been released after hourslong interviews in Texas, often with only the shirts on their backs, their documents still with Immigration and Customs Enforcement in St. Paul. Family and friends have scrambled to buy them bus and plane tickets home.



Walid Ali in his apartment in St. Paul, Minn., on Sunday. Mr. Ali, a 19-year-old Eritrean who came to the United States as an unaccompanied minor, said he was beaten after being arrested. Caroline Yang for The New York Times

Walid Ali, 19, also from Eritrea, was arrested outside his home in St. Paul on Jan. 13 and transferred to a holding facility where ICE is processing the refugees.

“They took my wallet, my phone, my social, driver’s license, everything,” said Mr. Ali, who arrived in the United States as an unaccompanied refugee minor in 2023. Friends and relatives paid for a flight back from Houston.

Mr. Ali said that he protested when his belongings were confiscated, and that agents responded by pushing him to the ground, kneeling on him and beating him. His uncle, who is a nurse, said he had made an appointment at a clinic to check his nephew's neck, shoulders and back, as well as to have his ribs X-rayed.

"This is not the American way, to grab people from the street and violate their rights, hit them," said the uncle, Sal Gimiy, 51.

Resettlement groups said the unpredictability of the tactics employed has amplified the fear rippling through refugee communities. While agents sometimes seek specific people, other times they seem to strike at random. They have knocked on doors and arrested an adult or an entire family, and have picked up people from grocery stores and city streets.

"We are hearing from a lot of families about their immense fear and confusion about what is happening," said Rebekah Phillips, the executive director of Arrive Ministries, a local resettlement agency. "They are afraid to send kids to school, attend work. They don't know if they will be detained, or redetained."

Refugees are often being questioned without the chance to prepare or to contact a lawyer, according to advocates and resettlement agencies. The groups were aware of refugees who have been released but many remain detained, they said, and did not know whether any had been deported.

The refugees who have been detained described being subjected to a jarring and bewildering process. Ms. Mehari, who works at the Minneapolis airport packing meals for airlines, spent five days in custody, first in St. Paul and then in Houston. Along the way, she was given conflicting information about her fate.

Her children did not hear from her until late in the afternoon on Jan. 13, the day she was arrested, when she was permitted to make a call from an ICE facility in St. Paul.

“I kept telling my mother not to sign anything,” her daughter, Yosan, recalled. Her mother had already applied for a green card, and Yosan suggested authorities could check her files.

In an interview with The Times, Ms. Mehari said she was told at the facility that she would be transferred to Texas and then deported to Eritrea. Do you want to take your kids with you, an officer asked, according to her recollection. “No, no, no,” she responded, insisting she had a friend who could care for the 13- and 14-year-old, who was not home when she was detained.

During a call to that friend shortly after, an officer explained that Ms. Mehari had been detained because she had not adjusted her status and her case would be reassessed, the friend, Elsa Zerai, said in an interview.

Ms. Mehari, who has been living in the United States since 2023, was baffled, she said. To work at the airport, she wears a badge that whisks her through security checkpoints for her shifts.

Upon arrival in Texas on Jan. 14, she said she was issued prison garb and rubber slippers, and locked in a frigid room with other women. There were mattresses on the floor and thin metallic sheets to huddle under. She said she lost track of time.

Ms. Mehari clung to her Christian faith. “God, help us,” she prayed. “What will become of me, my children?”

At some point, she was escorted to an interview room, where an immigration official questioned her for three hours with an interpreter on the line translating into Tigrinya. He asked about her history, her fears of returning to her homeland and her reasons for seeking refuge in the United States.

They were familiar questions — ones she had answered when she was screened to come to the United States, she said.

When she was returned to the cell, Ms. Mehari had no idea if she had passed or failed. She was allowed one brief call home during which she wept before the line was cut.

Then, one day, she was abruptly ordered to change back into her street clothes. It was Saturday, Jan. 17.

Ms. Mehari was released alongside several other men and women, all refugees. “I screamed: ‘I’m free! I’m free,’” Ms. Mehari recalled.

Without money and identification, they had to make it home.

Yosan sent an acquaintance in Houston \$255 to buy a plane ticket for her mother, and she sent screenshots of her mother’s immigration papers to his phone to show airport security.

Later that day, the family learned that her green card had been approved.

As of Sunday, Ms. Mehari still did not have her documents or her favorite gold chain, which the authorities confiscated.

Caroline Yang contributed reporting.

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