Trump hosts El Salvador's Bukele, key ally in anti-migrant push

AFP – US President Donald Trump is set to meet with Salvadoran counterpart Nayib Bukele on Monday, who has won heaping praise from Washington for partnering in its legally contested migrant crackdown.
Bukele is viewed as the Trump administration's closest ally in Latin America and enjoys broad support at home for his own strongfisted campaign against criminal groups.

Shortly after Trump's inauguration to a second term, Bukele made the extraordinary offer to take in prisoners from the United States.

Trump took the Salvadoran leader up on his proposal last month, sending over 250 migrants there in a rapid deportation blitz that came just hours after he invoked a rarely used law dating to 1798.

In El Salvador, the deportees were ushered into the notorious CECOT mega-prison, a crown jewel of Bukele's anti-gang efforts.

The Trump administration has contended that the migrants were members of criminal gangs designated by the United States as terrorist organizations, but relatives of several of the men contend they have no connection to organized crime.

One case in particular, that of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, has set off a major legal row, after the Trump administration admitted he had been deported in an "administrative error."

A federal judge has ordered the government to "facilitate" Abrego Garcia's return to the United States, but Trump officials contend he is now solely in Salvadoran custody.

White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said last week that the prison partnership would feature in Trump and Bukele's discussion.

Trump wrote on social media on Saturday that "our nations are working closely together to eradicate terrorist organizations and build a future of Prosperity."

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Sunday that 10 further "criminals" had arrived in El Salvador.

"The alliance between (Donald Trump) and President (Bukele) has become an example for security and prosperity in our hemisphere," he wrote on X.

— $6 million deal —

Aside from political benefits for both leaders, Bukele's offer to take in deportees serves as a potential security and economic boon for him.

His government received $6 million for taking deportees, which Bukele described as "a very low fee for them, but a high one for us."

Despite the partnership, El Salvador was among the dozens of US trade partners that the Trump administration slapped with 10 percent tariffs.

The United States is the main destination for Salvadoran exports. Of the nearly $6.5 billion in goods exported from El Salvador in 2024, $2.1 billion went to the United States, including clothing, sugar and coffee, according to the central bank.

For this reason, the president of the Salvadoran Industrial Association, Jorge Arriaza, hopes Bukele's visit to the White House will provide "a little more clarity" about the tariff's implementation.

The United States is home to 2.5 million Salvadorans who are a mainstay of their native country’s economy.

El Salvador received $8.5 billion in family remittances in 2024, 23 percent of the country’s GDP.

In January and February, remittances grew 14 percent compared to the same period in 2024, due to fears over deportation, according to economists.

AFP