

Chartered Forced Return Operation

23/24 September 2025

Human Rights Monitoring Report

Introduction

This report is submitted in connection with a chartered forced return operation from ██████ in Ireland to Islamabad Airport in Pakistan that took place during 23rd and 24th September 2025. A Human Rights Monitor (thereafter referred to as the Monitor) was appointed by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (thereafter referred to as the Department of Justice). This report contains a factual account and observations from the Monitor.

The report focuses on the following areas:

- A factual description to illustrate how the operation unfolded;
- The treatment of people subject to forced return (thereafter referred to as returnees), including any vulnerable groups;
- Any force or means of restraint used; and
- Relevant recommendations or exceptionally good practices.

The report is set out in the following phases of the operation

- Phase 1 - Pre-Event Briefings to the Monitor;
- Phase 2 - Day of Operation Briefings and Pre-Departure Arrangements;
- Phase 3 - Boarding and Flight; and
- Phase 4 - Arrival and Handover.

Within each phase, the Monitor provides observations on any relevant matters.

Phase 1 - Pre-Event Briefings to the Monitor

This phase covers a number of pre-event briefings provided to the Monitor. The following aspects are considered to be relevant.

Observations:

Prior to the operation, the Monitor received a number of detailed and informative briefings from a Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration official and by senior gardaí from the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB). All of the briefings provided to the Monitor were detailed and informative.

A final and comprehensive pre-event briefing was delivered by GNIB on ██████. This briefing outlined the operational command structure, the operational plan and timings for the operation. The following key points were discussed:

- The flight is planned for 23 September 2025.
- This is the first charter flight to Pakistan.
- 28 people had been selected for return. This would most likely be subject to change.
- Returnees are all adult males and no families or children are anticipated.
- Risk assessments have been completed.
- There will be a number of gardaí assigned as escort officers to each returnee. The number is based on risk. There will also be a number of other gardaí on the flight who are designated as a back-up team.
- All returnees were in the custody of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) at that time.

- Religious and dietary needs will be accommodated during the operation.
- A medical team and an interpreter will travel on the flight.
- Medical records of returnees will be provided in advance to the medical team.

Phase 2 - Day of Operation Briefings and Pre-Departure Arrangements

During this phase, the following aspects are considered to be relevant.

Escort Teams Briefing:

An operational briefing was delivered at approximately [REDACTED] to those gardaí on the escort teams.

Observations:

- Returnees to be collected by escort teams from three prison locations.
- A total of 24 returnees will be on the flight. All male adults and no women or children. A list of the returnees was provided to the Monitor.
- Returnees to be searched by the escort teams on collection and before placing them in vans [REDACTED]. The Escort Leader explained that a body search would take place at the prisons, but it would be restricted to outer clothes only, and it would be non-intrusive. This process was not observed by the Monitor.
- Any property belonging to the returnees that is handed over by the IPS will be retained by the escort teams and handed to the returnee on arrival in Islamabad.
- The senior officer in charge of the operation told the Monitor that at the time of their arrest, people had been told that they would be subject to a forced return. Those leaving today had been told about the flight details a few days ago.
- The role of the Monitor and the importance of providing full access to the Monitor was explained.
- Prior to attending [REDACTED], those returnees travelling from [REDACTED] were going to be taken to a garda station in Dublin for refreshments and use of toilet facilities.
- The medical team confirmed to the Monitor that they had received all medical records in advance. While some returnees were described as having serious conditions for which they were receiving medication, they were all deemed to be fit to travel.

Full Operational Briefing

An operational briefing was delivered at [REDACTED] to all other persons involved in the operation. This included the back-up team (also travelling on the flight), operational support gardaí (most of these gardaí were assisting with security at the airport but were not travelling on the flight), the medical team and the interpreter.

Observations:

- A video of a previous forced return operation was shown. This provided a good visual aide for those who had not previously participated in a forced return. The footage included facial shots of a number of returnees. This is considered by the Monitor to be unnecessary for a briefing aide and their faces should be should have been

anonymised to protect their privacy. This was brought to the attention of the senior officer in charge of the operation and the Escort Leader.

- The roles of the medical team and the interpreter were explained.
- The role of the Monitor and the importance of providing full access to the Monitor was reiterated again at this briefing.
- Movement of returnees during security checks, boarding and on the flight will be limited to one person at a time.
- The briefing highlighted the importance of gardaí maintaining good standards of behaviour.
- Use of force was included in the briefing. It was highlighted that restraints are available, but they have only been used once in a previous operation.
- After the briefing, the senior officer in charge of the operation informed the Monitor that GNIB in conjunction with the University of Limerick are developing a bespoke human rights training course for those gardaí involved in the returns process. This is viewed by the Monitor as a good initiative.
- Except returnees, all persons involved in the operation were provided with high-visibility vests. Depending on the specific role of individuals different coloured vests were allocated with the title of their function displayed on them. This included all gardaí (escorts and back-up team), an Interpreter, the Medical Team, an Air Partner Representative and the Monitor.

Security Risk Assessments for Returnees:

Risk assessments on all returnees were made available to the Monitor.

Observations:

- Two returnees were assessed as high risk – one for previous offending and one for behaviour while in IPS custody.
- Thirteen were assessed as medium risk. [REDACTED]
- Nine were assessed as low risk.
- No returnees were identified as having any specific vulnerabilities.
- The level of risk determined the number of escorting officers assigned to each returnee.

Travel to Dublin Airport:

All of those involved in the operation left the briefing location to travel in convoy to Dublin Airport. This journey was co-ordinated to coincide with the arrival of the vans that had collected the returnees from the IPS.

Security Checks:

Security checks took place at [REDACTED] this process commenced shortly [REDACTED]

Observations:

- All persons moving airside went through security checks.

- Returnees were taken directly from the vans and walked through security checks one at a time.
- Returnees were held by each arm by escorting officers. No other force was used.
- Security checks were conducted by [REDACTED]. Only jackets, a few outer tops and some shoes were removed.
- These checks were not intrusive.
- No restraints were used.
- All returnees were offered the use of toilet facilities in the security area and most took advantage of this. While the toilet doors were not closed, they were kept ajar and only the escorting officers were in attendance.
- Following this process, returnees were taken back to the vans.
- When all persons had been through security, the convoy moved to the waiting airplane for boarding.
- The senior officer in charge of the operation informed the Monitor that two mobile phones belonging to a returnee were not given to the escort team at one of the prisons. A garda unit was despatched to the prison and managed to return with the phones prior to the departure of the flight.

Phase 3 - Boarding and Flight

A flight brief and seating plan were provided to the Monitor. During this phase, the following aspects are considered to be relevant.

Boarding

Boarding commenced at about [REDACTED]

Observations:

- Prior to boarding, the airplane was searched by a garda search team. This recovered a table knife and a sharp instrument. There was no suspicious motive for these items.
- Large items/luggage belonging to returnees were placed in the hold of the plane. Smaller items were retained by the escort teams and taken onto the plane.
- Returnees were boarded one at a time.
- Returnees were held on each arm by escorting officers. No restraints or other force was used.
- One returnee stopped and indicated towards a garda member at the top of the boarding stairs to the plane who had a mobile phone that was pointing in their direction. The returnee was concerned that this was being used for recording purposes and was unwilling to go up the stairs to the plane. One of the escorting officers spoke to the returnee and persuaded the returnee to climb the stairs to the plane. The Escort Leader later confirmed that recording was taking place.
- Another returnee appeared agitated and was unwilling to board the plane until they had spoken to their family. An escorting officer reassured the returnee that they could contact their family, once they had boarded the plane. This calmed the situation and they boarded the plane without further incident.

Aircraft Condition:

Observations:

- The plane was an appropriate size for a long-haul flight and offered sufficient space.
- One of the plane doors was kept open until the flight was ready to depart.
- The plane was clean, well maintained and protected against excessive heat, cold and noise.
- The air-conditioning/heating system was used appropriately.
- The inflight entertainment system was not available on this aircraft.

Well-Being:

Observations:

- Returnees were strategically placed throughout the aircraft. This was determined by the risk assessment and set out in a seating plan.
- Escort officers were positioned either side of returnees and the back-up team were positioned nearby.
- Prior to departure, returnees were told that they could make contact with family members or legal representatives.
- Lavatory visits were managed appropriately during the flight.
- Two main meals were provided during the flight with vegetarian meals available. The Escort Leader received feedback from the garda escorts that the quality of food provided was of a lower standard than expected and that the serving of pork sausages as part of a full-Irish breakfast was inappropriate. The Escort Leader had been informed that halal food would be available. The provision of halal food was not specified in the flight brief.
- Sufficient water and other non-alcoholic beverages were available. For security reasons, hot drinks were not provided.
- Shortly after take-off, some returnees reported that they had headaches. They were attended to by the medical team and some returnees later told the Monitor that they felt better.
- The medical team also administered prescribed medication to returnees with pre-existing medical conditions.
- Many of the escort officers appeared to have developed a good rapport with the returnees. For example, one returnee showed the escort officers pictures of their home.
- One of the returnees (not the person referred to earlier) raised concern with the Monitor that their image appeared to have been recorded during the boarding process.

Restraint and Use of Force:

Observations:

- No sedatives were used during the flight.
- No restraints were used during the flight.
- No use of force was observed during the flight.

Phase 4 - Arrival and Handover

The flight arrived at Islamabad Airport in Pakistan at approximately 7am (local time) on Wednesday 24 September 2025. The handover commenced shortly afterwards. The following aspects are considered to be relevant.

Handover

On arrival, immigration officers of the receiving country were waiting to meet the plane.

Observations:

- Handover documents were provided by the Escort Lead to the local immigration officers.
- No information was provided to the immigration officers that could endanger the returnee's safety.
- Medication for returnees was handed over to immigration officers.
- An immigration officer boarded the plane and made an announcement to those returnees in the first section of the plane. The interpreter said that the immigration officer announced that it would take about 15 minutes to process the returnees.
- Personal items that were taken onto the plane earlier, were handed to the returnees at the point of disembarking from the plane.
- Returnees left the plane in single file and in groups of five.
- No restraints or use of force was observed during this process.
- The Escort Lead managed the handover process well.
- Information was later provided by a representative of the Irish Embassy that there was an altercation between some of the returnees in the baggage hall of the airport.

Handling of Complaints:

Observation:

Shortly after disembarking the plane, two of the returnees came back to the entrance of the plane. Both were agitated. One complained that there was a mobile phone missing from the items returned by their escort team (earlier received from the IPS) and another returnee complained that their luggage (reportedly located at an International Protection Accommodation Service centre) was missing. None of these items were given to the escort teams during the handover from the IPS. The Escort Lead took the details of the missing items and assured the returnees that they would look into this.

Summary

Overall, the operation was conducted in a humane manner, respectful of the dignity of the returnees and in compliance with the fundamental rights enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, applicable international human rights law and national legislation.

Use of force was limited to holding the arms of returnees at times of flight risk. No other use of force was observed and no restraints were used.

Apart from two returnees who were initially reluctant to board the plane [REDACTED], the returnee behaviour towards the escorting officers was good. In addition, the behaviour of

the escorting officers towards returnees was firm, but fair and respectful. Throughout the operation, there were good examples of rapport building by the escorting officers with the returnees.

At the operational briefing, the use of video footage from a previous forced return operation provided a good demonstration of how the operation would be managed. While it is accepted that this footage is intended for internal briefing purposes only, using facial images of returnees is not necessary for a briefing aide and footage should be anonymised to protect their privacy.

At the boarding stage, two returnees were concerned that their images were being recorded. This was later confirmed by the Escort Lead. If future forced return operations are going to be visually recorded, all returnees should be told in advance that this will occur, the reason explained and an assurance provided that their privacy will be protected.

The quality of food provided by the air carrier was of a lower standard than expected and the serving of pork sausages as part of a full-Irish breakfast was inappropriate. It is important that air carriers provide refreshments of sufficient quality and food that caters for all dietary needs.

Following the handover of property to returnees on arrival in Islamabad, two complaints were made that items of personal property were missing. This briefly delayed the handover process. At the time of receiving a returnee's property from a third party, the garda escort teams should ensure that the returnee is aware of the contents, and if necessary, make enquiries to find any missing items. This would avoid the situation that arose during the handover to the local authorities and at a time when this issue could not be resolved.

Good Practice

The development of a bespoke human rights training course for those garda personnel involved in the returns process is welcomed and considered to be good practice.

Recommendations

As a result of observations contained in this report, three recommendations are submitted for consideration.

1. Any use of video or still footage of returnees by An Garda Síochána should be anonymised to protect their privacy.
2. If forced return operations are going to be visually recorded by An Garda Síochána, all returnees should be told in advance that this will occur, the reason explained and an assurance provided that their privacy will be protected.
3. The Department of Justice must ensure that air partners provide refreshments of sufficient quality and food that caters for all dietary needs. This should be specified in the flight brief.

4. At the time of receiving a returnee's property from a third party, the garda escort team should ensure that the returnee is aware of the contents, and if necessary, make enquiries to find any missing items.

