

National Chartered Forced Return Operation (NCFRO)

Flight to Tbilisi Georgia on Wednesday 30 April 2025

Report of Human Rights Monitor.

Name of Monitor: [REDACTED]

Report

A. Activity Prior to day of Departure.

1. The monitor agreed to partake in the National Return Operation on 11 April. In performing his role, he drew on an information note prepared by the Department of Justice on the role of Human Rights Monitor, the September 2021 version of the Frontex publication "Forced-Return Monitoring" and the FAIR (Finding Agreement in Return) chapter D7.1, "Improved Return Monitoring Guidelines".
2. The monitor attended three preparatory meetings, in an observer capacity. These meetings took place on [REDACTED] and were attended by the administrative, legal and police leadership for the operation (as available). The full range of legal, logistical, security and human rights issues were considered at these meetings.
3. The monitor was informed that a large number of the proposed escort and back up teams for the flight had participated in a two-day familiarization course. He was also given an outline of the planned activity for the day of the return flight.

B. Pre-Departure activity on the day of the Flight.

4. The monitor arrived at [REDACTED] shortly before [REDACTED] on Thursday 27 February. He was given a chair and desk in the main operations room. He was also given a blue high visibility jacket with the words Observer printed on it, which he wore until the flight arrived in Tbilisi. As recommended in the monitor's report on the NCFRO of operation of Thursday 27 February, 2025, the observer's jacket was a different colour to the jackets worn by the other participants on the flight.
5. The monitor was informed that three families who were to be returned (three adult males, three adult females and four children) had already been delivered to the station. Prior to departure, a fourth family consisting of one adult male, one adult female and one child arrived at the station. The monitor asked on two occasions to visit the room in which these families were being held and was granted immediate access on both occasions. They were being held in a large, well ventilated, room with a number of Gardai and the interpreter for the flight. When asked, the families,

who were seated unrestrained around tables and at the side of the room, said that they were being treated well. The room had an ample supply of sandwiches, fruit and bottled water. Shortly prior to the flight three male adults who had been held in [REDACTED] were brought to [REDACTED].

6. The monitor attended a briefing for the Back Up Team at [REDACTED]. The leader of the Back Up Team outlined the planned transport of 23 male adults who were being detained in [REDACTED] and drew attention to the Monitor's presence at the briefing.
7. The fact that the Back Up Team had access to cable ties, and traditional handcuffs, if necessary was mentioned, [REDACTED].
[REDACTED] The Back Up Team leader, the Escort Leader and the Superintendent directing the GNIB stressed that restraints were only to be used as a matter of last resort, that the Team members should have regard to their Human Rights training and that most of the people to be deported had no criminal record, other than refusing to leave the State.
8. The Back Up team departed for [REDACTED] and collected 23 unaccompanied adult males in two Garda Prison vans where each of the people to be returned had their own cell. The head of the Back Up Team informed the monitor that no restraints had been used during the transfer to the plane.
9. The monitor attended, as an observer, the briefing for the main escort team at [REDACTED]. The same points that had been made in relation to restraint, the need to respect human rights, the role of the monitor and the fact that most of the people being returned had no criminal record were made at this briefing by the Escort Leader and the Chief Superintendent. Each escort pair were asked to ensure that they had access to at least one handcuff key. The role of the monitor was drawn to the attention of the Escort team.
10. The escort team was told to consult the seating plan for the plane to identify where they were seated. This seating plan, which was on the wall of the operations room, identified the people to be detained by number rather than name, in order to respect their privacy. Each pair of escorts was given a risk assessment for the individual or family they were to escort.

C. Boarding of Plane and Flight

11. At [REDACTED], the transfer of the people to be returned and the escort team to the airplane began. This involved meeting up with the [REDACTED]. The monitor was seated in the front of one of the vans carrying the medical team.
12. The full convoy of escorts, [REDACTED] for the four families proceeded to the plane. This involved all participants going through security screening by airport staff. The plane was searched. Then the escort team boarded the plane.

The families were boarded, as a group first. The monitor took a seat in the centre of the plane. The boarding of the remaining people to be returned then commenced. The back up team delivered those to be returned to the relevant pair of escorts. No restraints were used at any stage in this process.

13. The Documents and other personal items of the returnees were contained in a zip pouch which was held by the relevant Garda Escort. These bags were returned to the returnees before they left the flight on arrival in Tbilisi.
14. Any returnees who wished to phone contacts in Georgia were facilitated at that stage.
15. The family units consisting of four fathers, four mothers and five children, two of whom were [REDACTED] were transported in separate vans to the plane. These families were seated as a group at the back of the plane. The mothers and children were seated in two seats with a female garda at the end of the row. In the case of the family with two children, one child sat with her mother and one with her father.
16. The flight began boarding at [REDACTED] and was completed at [REDACTED]. The plane departed from its stand a few minutes after its planned departure time of [REDACTED]. The flight took five hours and fifteen minutes. In total 30 adult males, four adult females and five children were returned to Georgia.
17. The pilot gave regular updates in English of the flight's progress.
18. A system was put in place to use the toilets, with escorts raising their hand and two members of the backup team, or in the case of a female returnee, a member of the Back Up Team and a female Garda escort, accompanying the returnee to the toilet. The privacy of the returnees was respected in this process. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] The Back Up Team also replaced Escort Team members who needed to use the toilets or to take a rest.
19. A full refreshments and meal service was provided during the flight. This consisted of the distribution of a snack shortly after departure, the provision of a full meal roughly two hours after departure and the provision of an apple and a wafer biscuit shortly before landing. Plastic cutlery was provided and the meal had a choice of main courses with a chicken or vegetarian dish being offered. A tomato salad and a piece of cake was also offered with bread as an option. A range of cold drinks were offered with coffee offered after the meal. No alcohol was offered. All passengers were offered the same meal service.
20. The monitor had full range of movement on the flight and walked the length of the plane on three occasions. He spent one further period observing the treatment of the family units.
21. One returnee asked the monitor if he could have some paracetamol and the monitor informed the medical team. The medical team informed the monitor that there had

been a number of minor medical issues and that they were satisfied with the facilities provided.

22. A representative of the handling agent [REDACTED] [REDACTED] also took part in the flight.
23. The returnees were able to communicate with other returnees in adjacent rows.
24. On arrival in Tbilisi at [REDACTED] local time, the returnees departed the plane as a group and were greeted by the Georgian police and customs authorities who had been provided with the details of their arrival. A liaison officer from the GNIB was present landside with the Georgian police.

D. Recommendations and best practice.

25. The two-day familiarization course clearly assisted the effective and human rights centred conduct of the NCFRO. The monitor understands that a further course is planned and would recommend that these courses form part of the ongoing training for return operations

3 May 2025.

ENDS