

The Queer Africans Facing a Second Exile



Editor's Note

When African migrants build lives in the United States over decades, the systems meant to protect them can still place them at risk of removal to countries they have never lived in. Recent reporting from the United States has documented cases of West African women long resident in New York being detained and facing the possibility of third-country deportation. In another development, parallel investigations have shown that some of those affected are LGBTQ+ Africans who previously received legal protection in the US precisely because of the dangers they would face if returned to their countries of origin.

These removals form part of a wider third-country deportation practice that has expanded under current US policy. Agreements with several African governments have enabled the transfer of people to nations where they hold no citizenship, no family ties and, in many cases, no legal status. The risks are especially high for queer Africans. A number of the receiving countries criminalise same-sex relations or have documented records of hostility, violence, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. Therefore, the result of the current deportation practice is a second displacement: people who fled persecution are moved once more into environments that may reproduce the very threats they sought to escape.

This pattern raises fundamental questions about the meaning of protection, the limits



of legal status, the responsibilities of both sending and receiving states, and the lived precarity of diaspora life even after settlement. It also reveals how diaspora communities already settled in the Global North remain vulnerable to sudden policy shifts that treat African lives as transferable. The stories emerging from New York detention centres, Cameroon, Ghana, and from other receiving countries are not isolated incidents. They form part of a larger architecture in which African mobility continues to be managed through racialised and often opaque arrangements.

This issue examines the human consequences of these practices for African LGBTQ+ people and other long-term residents. We look at the policy mechanisms that make third-country removal possible and the fragile spaces of refuge that some African countries have offered.

Migration Monitor

The expansion of third-country deportations from the United States has placed a growing number of African residents, including long-settled West Africans and LGBTQ+ individuals who previously received legal protection, at risk of removal to African countries with which they have little or no connection. Recent investigations show that people who fled persecution or built lives over decades in American cities are being transferred under bilateral arrangements, sometimes to states that criminalise same-sex relations or have documented records of hostility toward LGBTQ+ people. The pattern is reshaping the security of African diaspora communities in the US and raising questions about the durability of protection once granted. Below is a chronicle of some key developments and country-level situations.

UNITED STATES – NEW YORK

In early October 2026, an investigation by Documented and The City reported that Immigration and Customs Enforcement had detained several West African women who had lived in New York for years, including cleaners, healthcare workers, and hair braiders. Many held legal status shielding them from return to their countries of origin after immigration judges found they would face danger there. Following a September Supreme Court decision allowing third-country removals to continue temporarily, advocates reported that some of these women faced the possibility of transfer to countries such as Ghana. By early August 2026, data indicated that 147 people arrested in New York City



had already been deported to third countries, up from 86 in the same period the previous year. Community members organised outside 26 Federal Plaza in response.

CAMEROON

Cameroon has become one of the principal African destinations for US third-country deportees. Reporting in 2026 documented multiple flights carrying people from Ghana, Morocco, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and other countries. Among those transferred were LGBTQ+ individuals who had been granted withholding of removal in the United States because of persecution linked to their sexual orientation. Several remained in detention facilities in Yaoundé under restricted conditions, with limited access to work or movement, while others reported pressure to accept onward return to their countries of origin. Cameroon criminalises

same-sex relations, and rights groups have highlighted the heightened risks this creates for queer deportees.

GHANA

Ghana has received multiple groups of third-country nationals from the United States under a bilateral arrangement. Some deportees were West Africans who held US court protections against return to their home countries. Investigations found that a number were later moved onward by Ghanaian authorities, in some cases back to the countries from which they had originally fled. Community organisers and lawyers have tracked cases involving both long-term US residents and LGBTQ+ individuals, noting that the transfers often occurred with limited prior notice of the final destination.

SIERRA LEONE AND ESWATINI

Both countries appear among the destinations identified in a Reuters investigation of 40 LGBTQ+ migrants who had received US legal protection but were later deported to African states that either criminalise same-sex acts or have been described by the US State Department as hostile to LGBTQ+ people. Sierra Leone and Eswatini are among those with explicit criminalisation. Some individuals spent periods under surveillance or in temporary accommodation before further movement, while others remain in uncertain legal and physical situations.

CAPE VERDE

In contrast to the above destinations, Cape Verde has emerged as a fragile point of refuge for some African LGBTQ+ people fleeing repression elsewhere on the continent. Homosexuality has been legal since 2004 and workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited. Reporting in 2026 described the archipelago receiving individuals from Senegal and other countries after the tightening of anti-LGBTQ+ laws elsewhere. While the legal environment is relatively more open, the absence of a full asylum framework leaves many without secure long-term status, creating a precarious form of safety.



From our Writers

Surviving Uganda's Anti-Gay Law While Outed, Exiled, & Mourning

Ernest Nweke

When Steven Muleme got news that his sick father had died, he came undone. It was his 14th month in exile, and though he had sent money back home to Uganda to cover his sick father's medical bills and even paid to move him from Uganda to Kenya with the hope that he could access better medical care there, he could not get past the fact that his 60 years old father who had been there for him in his best and worst days endured a failing health for 1 year without him being able to sit by his side and comfort him even for one night. With eight simple words he let the world know his pain. On Facebook, he announced "My life is shattered, my father is dead."

Steven Muleme is a gay Ugandan man forced into exile by Uganda's draconian anti gay Bill which became law in 2023. Prior to his forced relocation, Steven was a vocal equal rights gay activist in Uganda. He was deeply invested in organising, and providing community for gay people in Uganda. He did simple wholesome things like starting a Queer Netball team for gay Ugandans as being gay is grounds for disqualification from Uganda's National Netball Team. He also founded the gay rights advocacy group Visual Echoes for Human Rights Advocacy and sat on the boards of Interpride, Out And Proud Uganda, Kuchu Shiners, Rainbow Africa Initiative and many more. Steven dedicated his life to highlighting gay voices in Uganda and other African countries and calling for the recognition of gay rights as human rights across these countries. After the



signing of Uganda's anti gay bill, which is seen as one of the strictest anti-gay laws in the world, Steven immediately became a fugitive in his home country and had to leave. Today, living in America as a refugee, Steven Muleme continues to push for the liberation of queer Africans in Africa. He currently sits on the board of Refugee America and continues to tell the stories of queer Africans and what it means to be African and gay as a playwright.

When Steven's father died, he did not have the liberty to give him the final honour of being present at his funeral. Still unable to return home, Steven had to mourn his father's passing alone in the US while watching from a distance like a stranger, as one of the people closest to him was sent off from this world. Beyond the emotional violence that his Exile-forced absence ensured, was also the cultural violence of not laying his father to rest that Steven had to endure because of his exile. Though he was able to get a one week leave off work to mourn his loss, streaming his own father's memorial service and lying in state was an emotional scandal Steven could not have prepared for. "I watched everything from my phone," he said while describing the days that followed his father's death and his father's funeral. "Ideally I was still supposed to show up to work but I explained to my employers and they were kind enough to grant me one week off work to process my loss. I was alone in my apartment and that was the worst part of it all." Steven narrated.

Steven had shared a close and loving relationship with his father. "When I was outed, my family called a meeting to ask me

to explain the news they were hearing to them. I could tell that my father was heartbroken because that was not the kind of news any parent in Uganda would like to hear about their child, but following the news, he did not act like most parents in Uganda would. He did not cast me off or stop loving me. He stuck by me as I navigated being an out gay man in a country where homophobia was as normalised as drawing in breaths," Steven said while trying to give context to the relationship he had with his father. After he was outed, their relationship grew stronger. Even in exile, they spoke often. They talked everyday until his father succumbed to death.

"Even before the Bill officially became a law, being gay in Uganda was a dangerous thing. You get fired from your job when news comes out that you are gay. I know an athlete, a professional Netball player, who was sacked from the national team because he was gay. Family members and acquaintances distance themselves from you when they hear that you are gay. It was not any less for me. When my family heard that I was gay after someone who was close to me outed me, they called a family meeting. My parents, siblings and uncles were called and I was asked to explain the meaning of such news. That was how my whole life changed."

Uganda's anti gay law has some of the strictest punishments for being gay and for gay organising (activism and creating community for gay people) in the world. With punishments as severe as life imprisonment for "engaging in acts of homosexuality" and 20 years jail time for

“promoting homosexuality”, gay activists like Steven immediately became wanted fugitives in their own country. For Steven, the only option, as far as his freedom and freedom of expression was concerned, was to leave Uganda.

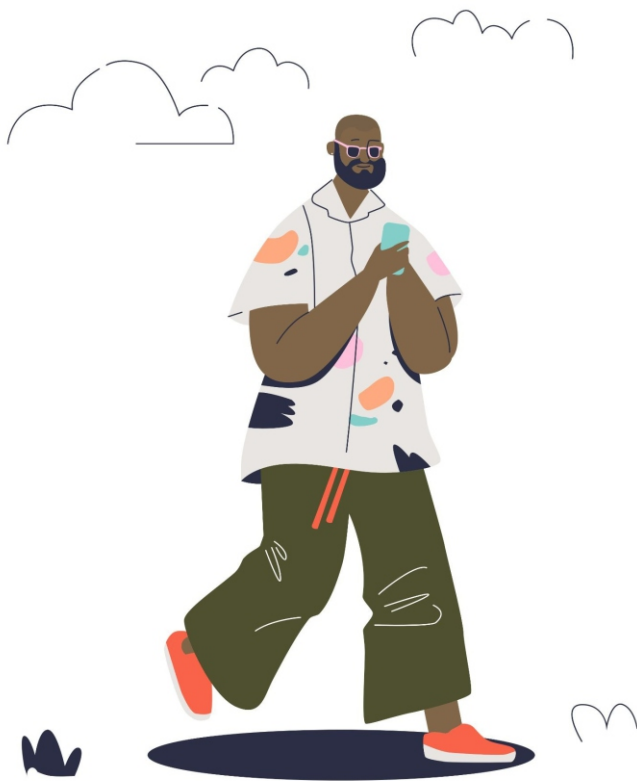
The first few months in America were some of the harshest months Steven had known before the death of his father. Getting a job had not been easy and being a refugee, Steven’s movements in America were severely limited. “I did not get the job I had applied for which I had the skills and experience for because I did not have experience in that role in the US. I had to be offered a role in a level less than what I had applied for with the option of reapplying again after six months. I have been on the job now for about three months and hope to reapply again soon.” Steven said while explaining what settling in looked like career-wise. Another challenge Steven had was finding community. He had to begin to make friends and find community again from scratch in a new country because of his relocation from Uganda. Most of his friends, contacts and acquaintances had come from his life and time growing up and working in Uganda and some other African countries. In the US, Steven took some time before he could settle in again.

When Steven’s father died, his boss gave him one week off work to mourn. “Being a refugee, my work did not make such provisions but my boss was kind enough to allow me take time off work. I was given one whole week. In that week, I called my family every day, I cried, I sat around them and tried to process my loss. My inability to be present

at the burial made it all worse. There was nothing I could do about the whole situation. I had to suffer the pain of losing my father alone, separated from the rest of my family in a foreign country.” Steven said, coming to tears again.

For Steven, the clear understanding that exile is a forced stay away from home and not a vacation marks the experience of being in New York. Knowing that this sojourn is only happening because he is gay and believes that his rights are human rights makes it even worse. While he tries to navigate the experience one day at a time, continually speaking up against the cruelty of the Ugandan government against its queer population, he only hopes that one day the Ugandan anti gay bill can be repealed and he can be free to return home whenever he wants.





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What to Read Now

Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing* is a tender, politically charged coming-of-age novel about friendship, identity, and migration. Following best friends Karl and Abu, two Black teenagers navigating London, Popoola explores what it means to grow up in a world that is often unwilling to make room for the complexities of young people's lives.

At its heart, the novel is concerned with the things that remain unsaid: the silences imposed by society, the difficulty of articulating one's identity, and the distance between how we understand ourselves and how others perceive us. Through Karl and Abu's friendship, Popoola examines masculinity, race, sexuality, and belonging without reducing her characters to mere symbols of the issues they embody. *When We Speak of Nothing* is ultimately a moving meditation on friendship, visibility, and the power of telling stories that dominant narratives would rather leave untold.

'This smart novel with electric prose tells us what it means to be young, black and queer.'
Elle Magazine

When We Speak of Nothing Olumide Popoola

CASSAVA
REPUBLIC

Resources

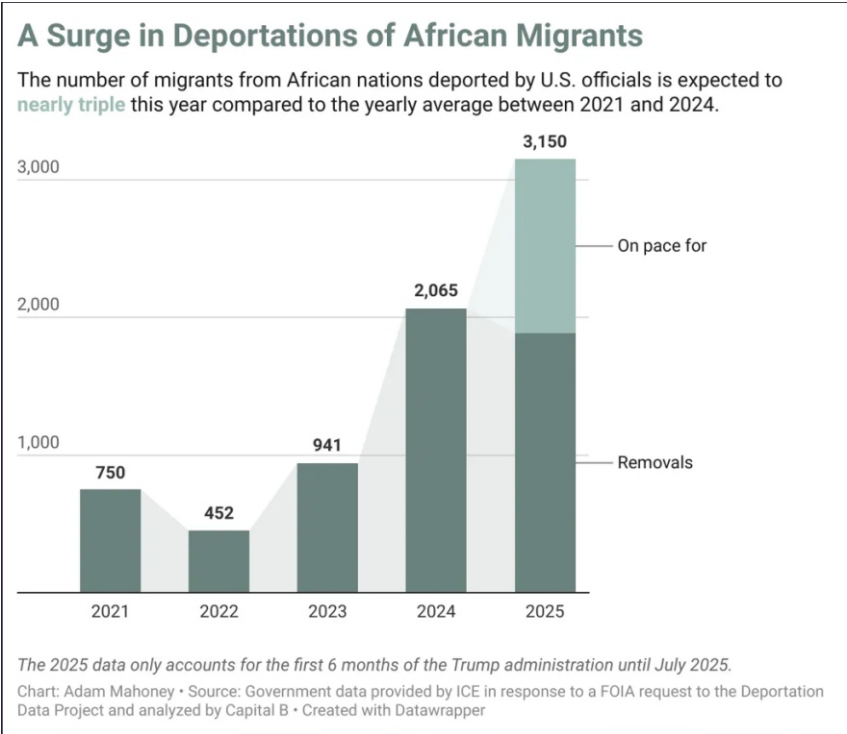


Founded in April 2006 amid opposition to restrictive laws affecting immigrants in the United States, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) was established by a South African immigrant and civil rights leader to ensure Black immigrants and their community were represented in legislative processes.

BAJI's mission and values include fighting for the rights of Black migrants and African Americans through legal resources and policy advocacy that help improve their community's lives and conditions and centre on challenging racist laws and systems while promoting a just system for all.

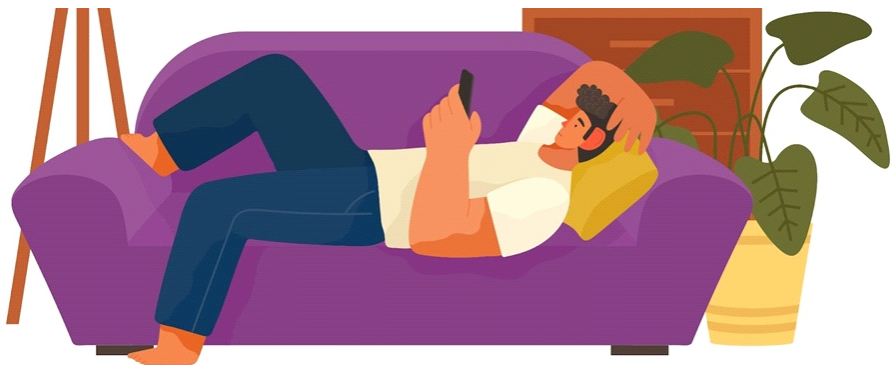
Further inquiries: <https://www.baji.org/>

In Numbers



The chart illustrates the increase in deportations of African migrants from the United States between 2021 and 2025. According to the data, removals rose from 941 in 2023 to 2,065. The 2025 projection is based on data from the first six months of the year, which highlights the growing scale of immigration enforcement against African nationals.

Source: Capital B, based on government data provided by ICE.



WEDNESDAY SPECIAL

PM NEWS Wednesday, July 2, 1997

For Joyee Onibiyo and her husband, a local government engineer, home meant Britain. But 18 months ago, he and their youngest son were deported.

When the phone rang, Joyee Onibiyo had just finished the prayers she says daily for her husband, Abdul, and her youngest son, Ade, both deported from Britain during the past 18 months. Down a crackling line she heard Abdul's voice telling her that he had escaped from prison in Nigeria and was in hiding in a neighbouring African country. It was the first she had heard of him for 18 months.

That was two weeks ago. The last time Joyee saw Abdul and Ade, they were skeletal figures in detention centres in the UK. Sitting now in her terraced house in south-east London, surrounded by photographs of them, she says: "The phone call from Abdul was like an answer from God - hearing him, knowing that he was alive. But his health is very bad and he is in the greatest danger. I am praying now that Jack Straw will show compassion and bring him back here before he is recaptured and very possibly killed."

The case of the Onibiyo, a Nigerian family who had made their home in Britain for 30 years, became something of a cause célèbre when Abdul, a civil engineer working for Lambeth Council and a high-profile opponent of the Nigerian military regime, was deported to Lagos. He had been seen left at the airport by the British immigration officials who had escorted him there, and before being taken away by Nigerian officers. He was not heard of again and both the Home Office and the government in Lagos denied any knowledge of what had happened to him.

The family's distress was great enough when they realised that the Home Office was serious about getting rid of Abdul. But then came what Joyce describes as "the almost unbearable cruelty" when immigration officials picked up 18-year-old Ade, saying that he, too, must apply for asylum. "His only hope," Joyce says, "was to be born in Nigeria. But he had lived in England since the age of 13 and this is his home."

For 13 months Ade was kept in Harmondsworth and Campfield detention centres, knowing that his father was being deported and that realising the same fate awaited him, as his pleas for asy-

lum were turned down. Joyce's voice breaks as she remembers how, during one of her final visits to Ade at Campfield, he clung to her, begging: "Mum, let me. Don't let them take me. But with grim synchronicity, the deportation date was fixed for Ade's birthday, 7 December 1995.

The Onibiyo's story began in 1964, when Abdul came to Britain on a British Council retraining programme and he and Joyce married in the UK. They were granted permanent residency in 1974. Abdul had gone back to Nigeria temporarily to work on a contract. They took their two children, Tim and Lola, and while they were back in Nigeria, Ade and his two younger sisters, Toyin and Yemi, were born. They came back to their home in Britain regularly, and Abdul continued, as arranged with the British authorities, to pay National Insurance stamps in the UK. Joyce explains: "Abdul's skills were badly needed in Nigeria, so he agreed to help with a new water and sewage project there. But we always intended to return to Britain, which we regarded as home."

They came back in 1983 because Abdul had been nominated for an EEC award and invited to Newcastle University to do a Masters degree. It was then that their trouble began. The couple were told when they arrived back that they had forfeited their residency by being out of the country for more than two years. "Nobody told us when we were leaving that this was the case," Joyce says. They assumed that the stamp in their passports saying Indefinite Leave to Remain meant that that. They also believed that, because Abdul was paying national insurance they were seen as still belonging in Britain. "We would never have gone otherwise," she says.

The Onibiyo were given detention when getting a visa to re-enter was refused. During the following months, the Onibiyo's solicitor appealed against the decision, but on the evening of 25 October, Joyce received a call from Abdul saying he was to be deported the next day and she should pack a few things. She travelled to Gatwick with the children the next morning, having been

with an Essex local authority, where they shared his belief that getting residency back was a formality. Joyce's laugh is weary as she recalls: "I would see you full of joy and then you would be in a state of despair. I watched my children making friends, doing well at school and attending church. I felt we were blessed and had been made at home here."

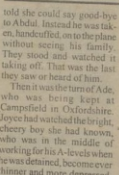
It did not feel like that when, in 1984, the Onibiyo were told that residency had been refused. Abdul's solicitor was amazed, and a protracted correspondence took place, but nothing happened for a long time, until the morning that is seared in Joyce's memory. "The first time we realised how serious things had become was at six o'clock on the morning of 24 October 1995, when there was a knock on the door and 12 police and immigration officials rushed into our home. They turned everything upside-down and then detained both Abdul and Ade for 13 hours in police cells. We were all interviewed by immigration officials and told we had to sign on monthly because we were temporarily admitted to the country. I felt sure it was a terrible mistake. After all, this was our 11th year back in Britain, and it was not as though we were living on benefits or committing any crime."

But reinstatement of the residency was refused. Abdul was told that he and Ade must apply for asylum. Joyce says: "Then we became scared. The rulers had changed in Nigeria since we were there, and there was a military regime. It was known that Abdul opposed them. He had been on demonstrations, and was involved in pro-democracy here. We had no doubt he would be seen as a wanted man in Nigeria."

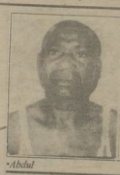
On a March morning in 1995, Abdul would still have been in the UK, but his asylum had been refused. During the following months, the Onibiyo's solicitor appealed against the decision, but on the evening of 25 October, Joyce received a call from Abdul saying he was to be deported the next day and she should pack a few things. She travelled to Gatwick with the children the next morning, having been



Joyee Onibiyo: Brooding over the deportation of her husband and child



Abdul



Ade

had failed, Ade's deportation was set for 2 May 1996. At the 11th hour, a campaign group, which had gathered thousands of supporters and the backing of 76 MPs, secured safe haven for Ade in Guyana, where he has since been reunited with his family.

Joyce says: "The relief was enormous but still there was dreadful sadness. My son, who had just lost one parent, was being banished from the rest of his family and I had no idea when I might see him again."

She has not seen him since, and although the authorities in Guyana have treated Ade well, they have recently contacted Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, to ask when, now that there is a change of gov-

ernment, he can be returned. Meanwhile Jeremy Corbyn has made "urgent representations" to the Home Office, asking that Abdul is let into the country immediately. "I have no doubt this is a life-and-death situation," he says.

"What happens will be a test of just how humane the Home Office really intends to be towards immigration and asylum cases," he is also asking that Ade be brought back here so that he can see his family. "I can no longer keep him, he too risks being sent to Nigeria. And anyhow, he says: 'The point is to get this family back together again so that they can get on with their lives.'"

Colin Thompson
The Independent

This 1997 newspaper report by P.M. News documents the distress experienced by the Onibiyo family following the forceful removal of Abdul Onibiyo from the United Kingdom to Nigeria over issues concerning his residency. Their 18-year-old son was also made to relocate to Guyana, a country he had never lived in, which nevertheless granted him safe haven. The reports highlight the emotional toll on the family, particularly the wife, left distraught by the separation from her husband and son without a proper goodbye, while she remained in the United Kingdom with their two daughters.

The Community Corner



Jamel Buhari: The Unrecognized Complexities of Queer Migration

Jamel Buhari is an Amsterdam-based Dutch-Ghanaian researcher and community organizer. He is currently finalizing his PhD at Leiden University, where his research focuses on the lived experiences of queer African migrants in the Netherlands. His work examines how queer Africans navigate the Dutch social and institutional landscape, negotiate questions of belonging and construct their identities. From a historical perspective, he explores how migrants' self-narratives intersect with broader hegemonic discourses in media, politics, and NGO spaces. His research also critically engages with the Dutch national self-image and global reputation, particularly the framing of LGBTQI+ rights as a core element of Dutch national identity. In collaboration with Obodo Nigeria, Jamel also started the African Queer Mobility Month, a series of creative participant-led workshops, exploring how queer people move, resist, create and belong in the face of anti-queer and anti-trans hostility.

A full essay is available to read on Diaspora Africa's website.

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We are building a newsroom & community that counters misinformation and bias in global mainstream news about African migration. We are working with local and cross-border journalists to challenge biased global reporting frameworks that shape migration. We want to disrupt extractive storytelling practices & expand the range of perspectives represented in international media discourse surrounding migration.

The magazine is independently funded by the Diaspora Africa team. Many updates featured in this publication are sourced from our Migration Monitor database, which tracks migration trends affecting African migrants and diasporic communities globally.

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