Nun detained by ICE speaks out for 1st time

Lawyer says she's done 'everything' asked of her

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USA TODAY

A Catholic nun who was detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers while walking to Mass in South Texas said she continues to live with fear and uncertainty weeks after her arrest drew national attention and bipartisan calls for her release.

Sister Leticia 'Letty' Ugboaja, a 56-year-old nun from Nigeria, spoke publicly for the first time since she was detained by ICE officers on June 28 in McAllen, a city just north of the U.S.-Mexico border. During a news conference July 23, Ugboaja described being stopped by two armed federal officers as she walked to Our Lady of Sorrows Church for Sunday Mass, where she was scheduled to serve as a eucharistic minister.

'I was very much afraid, with cold sweat,' Ugboaja said at the news conference. 'I did not expect on an ordinary Sunday morning when people should be ready to go to Mass to worship the Lord' that she would be taken into custody.

Ugboaja was released later the same day after intervention from members of Texas' congressional delegation and public outcry over the detention of a nun wearing her habit on her way to worship. The case sparked criticism from both Democrats and Republicans, who questioned why she had been detained.

The League of United Latin American Citizens, the oldest and largest Latino civil rights organization in the United States, also launched a petition calling for an immediate investigation into her detention.

Ugboaja said many other immigrants face similar situations without the public attention her case received. She urged immigration authorities to give people an opportunity to be heard before they are taken into custody.

'There are many others in this same situation, people who have been given some form of protection under our laws, who have followed every rule asked of them, and who still live with uncertainty,' Ugboaja said.

USA TODAY has reached out to the Department of Homeland Security and ICE for comment.

Ugboaja's attorney, Carlos M. Garcia, said an immigration judge denied Ugboaja's asylum claim in 2019 but granted her protection from removal to Nigeria, concluding that 'she had met the high legal standard required to show it was more likely than not that she would face torture if returned there.'

That protection bars the U.S. government from deporting her to Nigeria, Garcia said, though she remains under a final order of removal because her asylum application was denied. Ugboaja has complied with all conditions of her immigration status since the ruling, including maintaining employment authorization and attending required immigration appointments, according to Garcia.

'She has done everything the law has asked of her,' he said at the

news conference.

Ugboaja is scheduled to report to ICE on July 28, and Garcia urged federal authorities not to detain her again or require her to wear an electronic monitoring device.

When Ugboaja was detained, Garcia said she was given little explanation for why she was being taken into custody. He noted that ICE was attempting to remove her to a third country.

Over the last year, the Trump administration has dramatically expanded a little-known tactic of sending migrants to countries where they have no ties, USA TODAY previously reported. Critics have said this outsources detention to foreign governments – often those with records of human rights abuses, minimal oversight and unclear legal protections.

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Ugboaja

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