

Prisoner Abroad



When justice fails, survival becomes the only truth.”



Title: Prisoner Abroad

Subtitle: Based on a true story

Author: John Esteban Serna Londoño

Suggested image: Human shadow behind bars / airport / dark corridor.



Logline

A man traveling abroad in search of a better future is unjustly arrested and held in pretrial detention for 41 months, forced to survive a system that accuses him without evidence, silences him through language barriers, and traps thousands of foreigners in the same structural failures.



SHORT SYNOPSIS

A man arrives abroad seeking new opportunities, but is arrested without evidence and sent to pretrial detention. For 41 months, he faces a justice system that accuses him without hearing his side, isolates him for not speaking the language, and subjects him to endless hearings and dehumanizing transfers. In an environment where thousands of foreigners are trapped in the same structural failures, he fights to prove his innocence and survive a process that seems designed to prolong detention rather than uncover the truth.



Long synopsis

A man travels abroad hoping to secure a better future for his wife and children. His arrival appears routine, but as he attempts to leave the airport, he is abruptly detained by customs officers.

Without clear evidence, a comprehensible explanation, or immediate access to legal assistance, he is accused of serious crimes he never committed. Within hours, his life is irreversibly altered: he is placed in pretrial detention in a country whose language he does not speak and whose legal system he does not understand.

Inside the prison, time seems to stop. He soon realizes he is not alone—thousands of foreigners remain detained without clarity about their cases, trapped in a system that operates more out of inertia than justice. Isolated, confused, and unable to communicate, he faces conditions that violate his dignity and force him to learn how to survive in a hostile environment. He observes, listens, and mentally records every detail, uncovering patterns that reveal deep structural flaws: poorly prepared reports, institutional biases, automatic decisions, and a bureaucracy seemingly designed to keep detainees inside rather than uncover the truth.



Unique selling points

- Based on a true story experienced from the inside
- Privileged access to an invisible world rarely portrayed on screen
- Unique narrative structure combining prison, courts, and transfers
- A universal protagonist anyone can identify with
- A justice system driven by inertia rather than truth
- Real social impact rooted in lived experience
- Strong international relevance and market potential
- Hybrid tone: legal thriller + prison drama + human testimony



Central Theme

The story explores structural injustice and the extreme vulnerability of foreigners trapped in a legal system that makes no distinction between innocence and guilt.

Narrative Purpose

To reveal, from the inside, how an ordinary person can be swallowed by a judicial process they do not understand, where language, bureaucracy, and isolation become forms of silent punishment.

Human Purpose

To expose the fragility of human rights when someone is far from home, stripped of communication, and forced to navigate a system that was never designed to protect them.

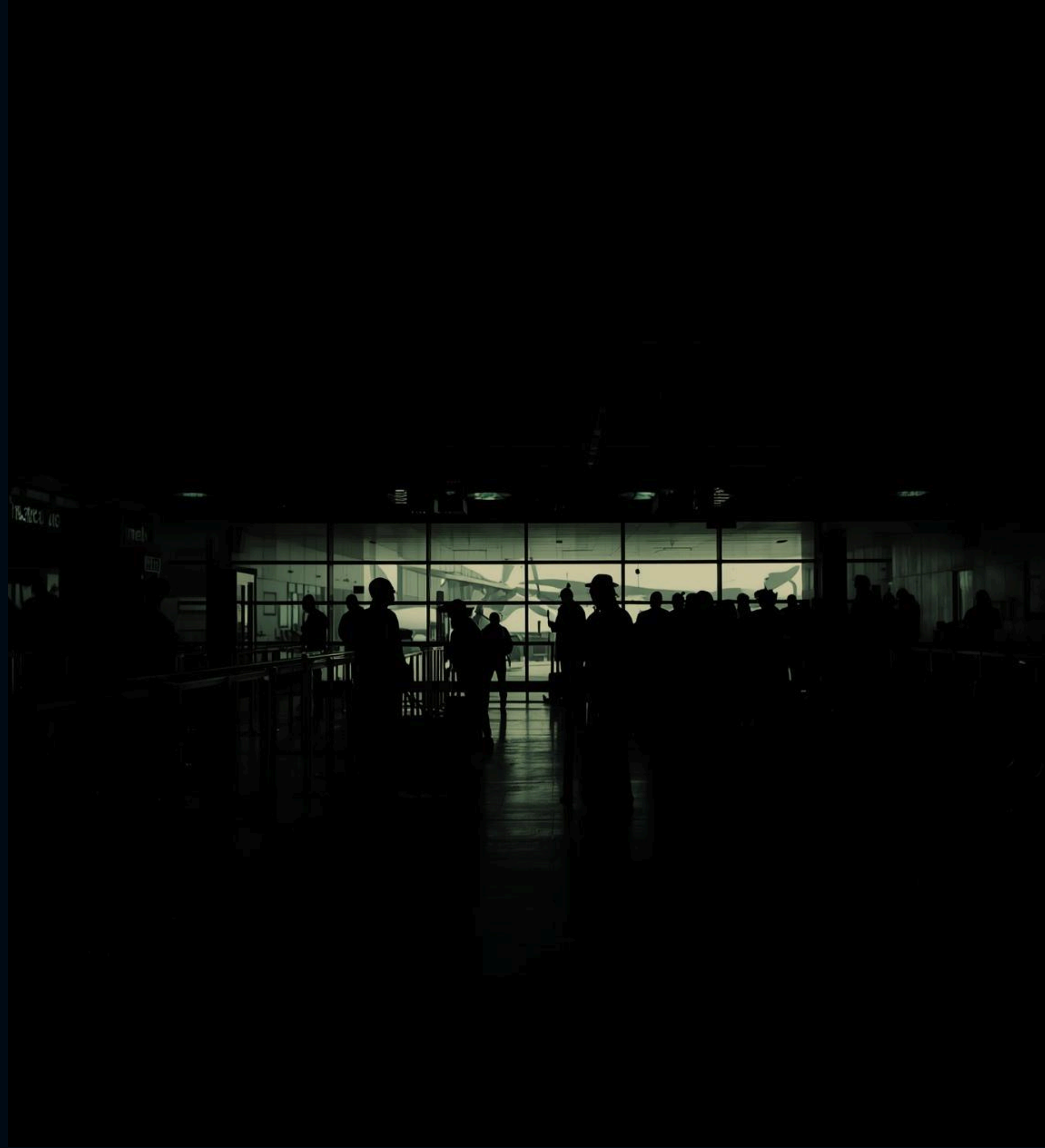
Cinematic Purpose

To immerse the audience in a tense, claustrophobic, and emotionally charged experience—blending the realism of testimony with the intensity of a legal thriller and the intimacy of a survival story.



Context

Contemporary migration has created a global reality where thousands of foreigners are detained each year due to misunderstandings, administrative errors, or language barriers. Overcrowded prisons and slow judicial systems erode the presumption of innocence, leaving many trapped in processes they cannot understand. This story reflects that universal phenomenon, not a specific country: a system where procedure often outweighs truth, and where foreigners become invisible inside bureaucratic machinery.



Main characters

The Man (Protagonist)

A family man unjustly detained abroad, isolated by language barriers and forced to navigate a system he cannot understand.

The Observer

A seasoned inmate who knows the unwritten rules of confinement and becomes the protagonist's silent guide.

The Interpreter of Power

An official who embodies the bureaucracy of the system—cold, procedural, and detached from human reality.

The Lawyer

An overworked professional trying to help, limited by a saturated system that moves slowly and mechanically.

The Wife

The emotional anchor of the story, offering strength and hope from afar as she fights for her husband's freedom.



Protagonist Arc

- Travels abroad seeking a better future for his family
- Is abruptly arrested without evidence
- Is placed in pretrial detention in a foreign country
- Faces isolation, fear, and confusion due to language barriers
- Learns to survive inside a system he cannot understand
- Endures unfair hearings, mistranslations, and bureaucratic delays
- Resists emotionally and psychologically to preserve his dignity
- Emerges transformed, aware of the system's deep structural flaw



NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- 50% — Prison: Confinement, adaptation, observation, survival.
- 40% — Courts: Hearings, mistranslations, bureaucratic delays, arbitrary decisions.
- 5% — Transfers: Tense, dehumanizing movements between institutions.
- 5% — Release & Transformation: Understanding the system and reclaiming dignity.



VISUAL UNIVERSE

- Cool, metallic tones, grays, and deep blues
- Enclosed spaces, corridors, bars, shadows
- Impersonal courtrooms, documents, seals, desks
- Constant sense of surveillance and isolation
- Contrast between the darkness inside and the distant light outside



Tonal and cinematic references

- The Night Of — for its realistic portrayal of a justice system that overwhelms the individual
- A Prophet — for its immersive prison atmosphere and psychological tension
- Midnight Express — for its emotional intensity and sense of injustice
- When They See Us — for its human perspective on systemic failure
- Prisoners — for its emotional depth and moral complexity



TARGET AUDIENCE

- Adults 18+
- International audience
- Viewers interested in true stories, justice, migration, and human rights
- Ideal for streaming platforms, festivals, and global markets



Current status of the project

- Series bible completed: full character development, arcs, episodic structure, visual universe, and tone.
- Feature film bible completed: Narrative structure, treatment, visual approach, and character development ready for production.
- Filming permits pending: Official applications submitted in France and Abu Dhabi for institutional and controlled locations.
- International recognition: Official selection at Lift-Off Network Vol. 2 (Filmmaker category), validating the project's artistic and narrative potential.
- Institutional impact: A justice reform proposal based on the real experience has been formally presented to the United Nations.
- Pitch deck in development: Visual and conceptual materials being prepared for markets, funds, and platforms.
- Ready for markets and festivals: The project is positioned for pitching rounds, co-production opportunities, and international funding.

Statement of intent

This project is born from a real experience of injustice abroad. Its purpose is not to accuse any specific country, but to expose a global phenomenon: failing justice systems, overcrowded prisons, and foreigners trapped in processes they cannot understand. Through a personal and intimate perspective, the story seeks to give voice to those who are often unheard and to reveal how human dignity can endure even in the most hostile environments. The intention is to transform a painful experience into a narrative that raises awareness, sparks dialogue, and contributes to meaningful change.



Next steps for the project:

Active phase of expansion, production, and international marketing.

- Search for international producers and co-producers
- Attracting investors and film funds
- Closing production deals
- Participating in international markets and festivals
- Negotiating with streaming platforms
- Confirming filming permits in France and Abu Dhabi
- Developing the final screenplay
- Preparing for casting and production design
- International sales and distribution strategy



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Esteban Serna Londoño is a Colombian filmmaker, writer, and human rights advocate based in France. His work focuses on real stories that expose structural injustices and explore the resilience of the human spirit. After experiencing firsthand the failures of a foreign justice system, he transformed a deeply traumatic chapter of his life into a creative and social mission: to reveal what happens inside institutions that rarely allow public visibility.

He has developed multiple international projects, including feature films, series bibles, and narrative works rooted in testimony and social impact. His work has been recognized by international platforms such as the Lift-Off Network, and his justice reform proposal—based on his lived experience—has been formally presented to the United Nations.

Through *Prisoner Abroad*, he seeks to merge cinematic storytelling with institutional awareness, offering a narrative that is both emotionally powerful and socially urgent.

DIRECTOR'S VISION

The film will be told through an intimate, immersive perspective that places the audience inside the protagonist's psychological and physical confinement. The camera will remain close to him, capturing the tension of every silence, every misunderstanding, and every institutional gesture that shapes his fate. The visual language will emphasize claustrophobia: narrow corridors, metallic tones, and the constant presence of surveillance, contrasted with brief moments of light that symbolize hope and resilience.

The narrative rhythm will mirror the protagonist's emotional journey. Time will feel slow and heavy inside the prison, accelerating only during transfers and hearings, where confusion and fear intensify. Sound design will play a crucial role: distant echoes, muffled voices in an unknown language, and the mechanical noise of doors and chains will reinforce the sense of disorientation.

The film will avoid sensationalism. Instead, it will focus on authenticity, human dignity, and the quiet violence of bureaucratic systems. The goal is to create a cinematic experience that is both emotionally powerful and socially relevant—one that invites the audience to reflect on how easily an ordinary person can be swallowed by a system that no longer distinguishes between truth and procedure.

PRODUCTION NEEDS & BUDGET RANGE

Production Needs

- International co-production partners to support financing, logistics, and cross-border coordination.
- Access to controlled institutional locations (prisons, courts, administrative buildings) in France and Abu Dhabi, pending official permits.
- Casting of a diverse international ensemble, reflecting the multicultural reality of the story.
- Experienced production design team capable of recreating confined spaces, procedural environments, and realistic institutional atmospheres.
- Cinematographer specialized in immersive, character-driven visual language, emphasizing claustrophobia, tension, and emotional intimacy.
- Legal and cultural consultants to ensure accuracy, sensitivity, and authenticity in portraying judicial and prison systems.
- Post-production partners for sound design, color grading, and editing aligned with the film's tense, immersive tone.

Estimated Budget Range

- Feature Film: Mid-range European independent budget, suitable for international co-production frameworks.
- Series Format: Scalable budget depending on episode count, with potential for multi-country financing and platform partnerships.
- Funding Strategy: Combination of public film funds, international co-production treaties, private investment, and streaming platform interest.

Strategic Positioning

This project is designed for international markets, with strong appeal for:

- European and Middle Eastern co-production networks
- Human rights and social justice funds
- Platforms seeking true-story, high-impact content
- Festivals focused on political cinema, real events, and global narratives

WHY THIS STORY NOW

Across the world, justice systems are under pressure: overcrowded prisons, slow procedures, language barriers, and institutional inertia increasingly affect foreigners who cannot defend themselves. These failures are not isolated incidents but part of a growing global pattern. *Prisoner Abroad* speaks directly to this moment, when migration, human rights, and institutional accountability are at the center of international debate.

The story offers a rare inside perspective on a system that is usually hidden from public view. It exposes how easily an ordinary person can be misinterpreted, silenced, and trapped—not because of guilt, but because of structural flaws. At a time when societies are questioning the fairness and transparency of their institutions, this project provides a human, urgent, and universal narrative that resonates across borders.

By transforming a real experience into cinema, the project contributes to a broader conversation about justice reform, dignity, and the invisible lives affected by bureaucratic machinery. This is not just a story of survival; it is a call to reflect on the systems we trust and the people they fail to protect.

FESTIVAL & MARKET STRATEGY

Festival Strategy

Positioned for international festivals focused on political cinema, human rights, and true stories, including:

- Cannes (Un Certain Regard)
- Berlin (Panorama)
- Venice (Orizzonti)
- Toronto (TIFF)

Market Strategy

Targeting major industry markets to secure co-production and distribution:

- European Film Market
- Marché du Film
- TIFF Industry
- Ventana Sur

Platform Potential

The hybrid tone—legal thriller, prison drama, and human testimony—aligns with global streaming platforms seeking impactful true-story content.

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Author's Statement

This project is available for development, co-production, script consulting, and participation in international labs, residencies, and funding programs.

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thank you very much

