

Iowa City sons fight ICE detention, imminent deportation of mom

thegazette.com/news/iowa-city-sons-fight-ice-detention-imminent-deportation-of-mom/article_6d664e1b-a507-46b2-97e7-0cf4f5b7f2c7.html

Michael Baniewicz/The Gazette

September 29, 2026





Esoumaila Diallo poses for a portrait Tuesday at Eastside Java House in Iowa City. Diallo's mother, who works at the University of Iowa, was detained while on her way to work last week in Iowa City.

[Michael Baniewicz/The Gazette](#)

IOWA CITY — In the hazy predawn light of southeast Iowa City last Thursday, University of Iowa custodian Fatou Traore arrived at her sister's house around 6:30 a.m. to pick her up for work — like any other morning.

But on this day, an unfamiliar white car pulled up beside her, with a black car blocking her in from behind. And as two men in plain clothes exited their vehicles, Traore's sister, Haby Diallo, 32, grabbed her bag and rushed outside to help — and to ask questions.

“He didn’t say anything to me,” Diallo said of one of the men. “But when I moved this way, he moved this way. When I moved that way, he moved that way.”

The other man started knocking on Traore’s window.

“He said put the window down, put the window down, put the window down,” Diallo said. “I think my sister didn’t want to do it.”

But when she did, he reached in, opened her car door, pulled her out, placed her in handcuffs and put her in their unmarked vehicle, according to Diallo. They never identified themselves as officers or law enforcement or said why they were detaining her or where they were taking her.

“They didn’t give her time to say anything,” Diallo said. “And then they took her wallet and her phone.”

Diallo ran inside her house to call Traore’s husband, who lives nearby with the couple’s four sons. And he woke their oldest — 19-year-old Esoumaila Diallo — to help, as the father was worried about leaving the house himself.

“So I ran over there as fast as I can, no shirt, fresh off the wake-up to see what’s going on,” Esoumaila told The Gazette. “But when I got there, they were gone. So I got in the car and tried to follow — because at that time I’m thinking maybe it’s a kidnapping. Because we didn’t get a letter or anything from any judge.”

But Esoumaila couldn’t find the vehicle, so he tracked down a local police officer instead.

“I told them, ‘Hey, my mom got detained. Can you help?’” he said. “But they couldn’t help because I guess they don’t work together.”





Fatou Traore (center) and her family pose in Iowa City.
Submitted

In the days since, Traore's family has learned she was first taken to a detention center in Cedar Rapids, then to Hardin County Jail and then to a facility in Omaha before being moved to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Richwood Correctional Center in Monroe, Louisiana.

"She told me she's doing good, but you know a mother would never tell her child she's doing bad — even if she's doing bad," Esoumaila said, having talked to Traore on Monday. "She told me she's eating and she's sleeping. That she's OK. But again, do I believe her fully?"

Traore also told her son to "get a lawyer as quick as possible and to get documents" — because her deportation to Sierra Leone, where she's never been before, was imminent.

"She has an order of removal, so they're trying to deport her," Esoumaila said. "They said she was scheduled for deportation to Sierra Leone next week."

Family's immigration history

- Traore moved to the United States in 2005 from the Ivory Coast and is here legally on a 2011 "withholding of removal" order, granting recipients legal protection from deportation to a country where an applicant faces harm or torture. She has no criminal history.
- Her husband, Oumar Diallo, 56, is from Guinea and is here legally on the same order. He also works as a UI custodian and has no criminal history.
- Their oldest son, Esoumaila, 19, is a U.S. citizen and played basketball at City High before graduating last year and beginning his mechanical engineering studies at Kirkwood Community College this year.

- Their second son, Mamadou, 14, is a U.S. citizen and a freshman at City High, where he plays soccer.
- Their third son is 8-year-old Boubacar, who is in third grade at an Islamic elementary school locally.
- And their youngest, Yousouf, is 3 and keeps asking for his mom, Haby Diallo said.

"The little boy is 3 years old, crying every day for Mama," she said. "And we can't tell you, 'Don't cry. We know where is your mom.' We don't know too. It's kind of like a kidnapping. You don't tell us you're moving her. Now she's in Louisiana. How are we gonna know where you guys move her?"

Diallo said she has two children — ages 4 and 8 — who are extremely close with their aunt.

"She knows my sister like a mom," Diallo said of her 4-year-old daughter. "She calls my sister Mom. She calls me Aunt."

All the kids are that way.

"They know my sister more," she said, through tears. "Every day they're at my sister's house."

The morning Traore was detained, Diallo's little girl was watching out the window.

"She was watching the white car," Diallo said. "She said, 'That's my mom's car. I want my mom.'"

'Abuse of power'

Even as Traore's husband is afraid to leave the house — with friends and family bringing in food and care for the boys, too stressed to go to school — the family is meeting with attorneys to find a way to bring her home. On Tuesday, an attorney filed a motion to stay Traore's removal proceedings, along with a "motion to reopen contesting the planned removal to Sierra Leone," based on a credible fear of persecution if deported there.

"ICE's kidnapping of Fatou Traore on her way to work in Iowa City, 15 years after she won withholding of removal, is a cruel abuse of power," said Rogelio Lagunas, a Cedar Rapids factory worker and board member with Escucha Mi Voz Iowa — a local grassroots group dedicated to supporting immigrant and refugee communities. "We demand her immediate release and call on Representatives Mariannette Miller-Meeks and Ashley Hinson to intervene now to stop her third-country deportation and bring her home."

Traore's detention came one day after the [U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Sept. 23](#) blocked third-country deportations — finding them unlawful because the affected immigrants aren't given a chance to object or raise safety concerns.

That order to stop deporting immigrants to countries other than their own forced the cancellation of at least one flight carrying 70 people to three different countries — Burundi, Rwanda and the Central African Republic, according to national news outlets.

But, upon emergency appeal from the U.S. government, [the U.S. Supreme Court on Tuesday](#) granted its request to block the appeal court's ruling and allow third-country deportations to continue. The high court also said it would hear oral arguments in December and issue a final ruling on the issue.

'After she's left'

Although Esoumaila said his family had no notification or warning of the impending detention, he was followed home after attending class at Kirkwood the day before his mom was taken.

"I pulled into my driveway and then a car pulled in behind me," he said. "So I can't get out."

A man walked up to his window, which was halfway down, and asked, "Is this Mom's car?"

"I want to talk to Mom," he said. "And I was like, 'Well, she's not here. Is there a problem?' Because I thought maybe I was speeding. And he didn't answer my question. He just slowly walked back, got in his car and just left."

Esoumaila's dad has been too afraid to leave the house since the detention. And they've all been working together to take care of their youngest brother.

"I see my mom take care of them a lot, and she does it with such ease. It looks so easy," Esoumaila said. "But now, after she's left, it's not."

His 14-year-old brother isn't in the right head space to go to school. And Esoumaila said he's not either.

"When I grew up, I did boxing and sports so when one day, if it were to come, (I could) protect my mom or my family," he said. "And when she told me that they were taking her to jail, I started thinking like, there's killers in jail. There's murders in jail. And no matter what's going on, I can't help her. That really hurt me.

"That's really had my mind going crazy — her being jailed and not being able to help her in any way."