

Report exposes European complicity in CIA torture flights

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The European parliament has produced a report on the complicity of European governments in the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) practice of extraordinary rendition—the illegal transferring of detainees to locations where they stand a high risk of being tortured. Issued in draft form on November 28, the report will be debated in the European parliament in January 2007. It finds 11 European nations had knowledge of flights carrying detainees to secret prisons and overseas torture chambers, including Britain, Germany and Spain.

Following the exposure in November 2005 of the CIA's extraordinary rendition flights operating across Europe, national governments and European Union (EU) officials issued statements of shock and innocence. The widespread public anger and revulsion at this network of illegal flights compelled the European parliament to form a special committee to investigate the illegal CIA activities and the collusion of the EU. Led by the Italian Socialist Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Claudio Fava, the committee convened in January 2006.

Since its establishment, the committee has taken evidence from 130 people including government and EU officials, secret services agents, jurists, journalists and representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The MEPs state that the CIA has been “directly responsible” for the “illegal seizure, removal, abduction and detention of terrorist suspects on the territory of Member States, accession and candidate countries.”

The parliamentary committee considered that it was “implausible, on the basis of the testimonies and documents received to date, that certain European governments were not aware of the extraordinary rendition activities taking place on their territory or in their airspace or airports.”

The MEPs on the special committee found that the EU and many of its member governments knew about extraordinary rendition. Sarah Ludford, the British Liberal Democrat vice-chair of the committee, stated that “there is strong evidence that the CIA abducted, illegally imprisoned and transported alleged terrorists in Europe, while European governments, including the UK, turned a blind eye or actively colluded with the United States.”

The committee obtained recordings of an informal meeting between EU and NATO foreign ministers on December 7, 2005, attended by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. “The temporary committee has obtained, from a confidential source, records of the informal trans-Atlantic meeting...confirming that member states had knowledge of the program of extraordinary rendition and secret prisons,” the report says. Further evidence was obtained from records of other meetings between EU and US officials this year.

MEPs heard that 1,245 CIA rendition flights had used European airspace or airports, with an unknown number of these flights involving detainees who had been illegally abducted and transferred to a country carrying out torture on behalf of the US. Germany topped the list of stopovers by CIA-chartered rendition flights at 336, while Britain had 170. Other EU countries permitting potential torture flight stopovers

include Ireland, 147; Portugal, 91; Greece, 64; Italy, 47; Cyprus, 57; Romania, 21; and Poland, 11. The committee also found that Austria and Sweden were complicit in Washington's rendition programme, as were non-EU countries Turkey, Macedonia and Bosnia.

The lies and evasions of the EU and the European governments were also exposed in the course of the committee's enquiry.

Singled out for criticism was Britain's minister for Europe, Geoff Hoon—Secretary of Defence at the time of the Iraq war and one of the Blair government's chief propagandists regarding the threat from Iraq's supposed “weapons of mass destruction.” MEPs stated that Hoon's attitude to the special committee's investigation was “deplorable.” The British government has insisted that rendition is legal and that it does not approve of detainee transfers where there were “substantial grounds to believe they would face the real risk of torture.”

The reality of the British government's attitude to torture was expressed by the chief legal advisor to the British Foreign Office, Sir Michael Wood, who has advised that “receiving or possessing” information gained under torture is not banned under international law. Wood refused to give evidence to the committee.

Javier Solana, the foreign policy chief of the EU, and anti-terrorist co-ordinator Gijs de Vries were both criticised for evading questions about their knowledge of CIA rendition. The report was particularly critical of Solana, with MEPs expressing their concern at the “omissions and denials” that the EU's top diplomat proffered to the committee during his appearance in May.

NATO chief Jaap de Hoop Scheffer was also condemned for refusing to give evidence on the military organisation's potential collusion in the CIA's crimes.

The parliamentary report confirms the earlier findings of the human rights organisation the Council of Europe, which found in June 2006 that the CIA used aircraft hired by front companies to illegally transfer individuals seized from the streets of EU member states, to countries with appalling records of torture during interrogations, such as Egypt, Morocco and Syria. The Council of Europe also found that it was highly probable that the CIA was operating secret detention centres in Poland and Romania.

At the time, that report was dismissed by the EU, the individual European countries complicit in rendition and by the United States. All stated that it lacked “hard evidence,” despite the fact that the main difficulty in finding evidence was caused by the refusal of all the indicted governments to cooperate with the Council of Europe's investigation.

With a greater ability to call witnesses and retrieve documentary evidence than the Council of Europe had at its disposal—but still massively hampered by the cover-ups conducted by the EU, NATO, the European governments and the US—the European parliament was able to build a fuller picture of the web of CIA kidnappings and clandestine flights, stop-off points and detention facilities that are an integral part of the so-called “war on terror.”

Like the Council of Europe report, the MEPs investigated the alleged secret CIA detention centres in Poland and Romania, naming the site of a suspected secret US prison at Stare Kiejkuty in Poland. The parliamentary report described in detail how CIA-chartered Gulfstream jets landed at the secret Polish location, based on what the committee called “serious circumstantial evidence.”

Both countries rejected the committee’s allegations. “We stand by our earlier stance that there were not secret CIA prisons in Poland,” said a Polish government spokesman in response to the report. Zbigniew Siemiatkowski, who headed Polish intelligence from 2002 to 2004, commented the day after the report was published that “There were no such prisons in Poland.”

Siemiatkowski accepted that the Polish government and intelligence agency closely cooperated with the CIA. “In 2003, this cooperation was very intense, transferring people, transferring equipment to various places,” Siemiatkowski said. “This demanded a lot of flights, but this didn’t involve prisoners.”

Siemiatkowski said that in the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003, the US had proposed that Poland host a training base for Iraqi militia linked to Ahmed Chalabi, then a protégé of leading war planners in Washington, including Vice-President Dick Cheney. Warsaw allegedly declined this proposal, but it seems likely that it offered its territory to the US for other purposes.

“The committee’s report, from what we know so far, is not based on any strong proof but only commonly repeated assumptions, suspicions and probabilities,” said Krzysztof Lapinski, spokesman for Poland’s minister for special services.

Tellingly, Polish authorities worked precisely to prevent the European parliament committee from finding evidence either confirming or denying the existence of the CIA prison. The report complained of a lack of cooperation from the Polish

government and also expressed regret at Romania’s “lack of willingness to investigate in depth.”

The report expressed “serious concern” about the many CIA-operated aircraft operating across Europe that came from, or were destined for, countries that practice torture on the “extraordinary rendition circuits.”

In several cases, the European state authorities had played a key role in facilitating the seizure of their own citizens at the behest of the US.

Italian authorities provided assistance in the 2003 abduction of Egyptian cleric Abu Omar by CIA agents in Milan, among other cases cited by the committee. The report accused the former head of Italy’s SISMI intelligence service of “concealing the truth” when he told the committee that Italian agents had played no part in the CIA kidnapping of Omar.

On the contrary, the report stated that SISMI officials played a full role in the CIA’s seizure of Abu Omar from Italy. The MEPs also concluded that the CIA had kept Italian authorities informed on his later detention in Egypt, where Omar has been “held incommunicado and tortured ever since.”

Other cases examined were those of German citizen Khaled el-Masri, who was allegedly abducted in Macedonia and then detained and tortured in Afghanistan before being released without a trial, and those of two Egyptian citizens handed over to US agents by Swedish authorities. The two were flown to Egypt, where the organisation Human Rights Watch said there is credible evidence they were later tortured.

The committee found evidence of a global network of rendition flights in which European governments, especially Britain, were involved.

The report condemned the extraordinary rendition of two UK residents, Bisher al-Rawi, an Iraqi citizen, and Jamil el-Banna, originally from Jordan. They were detained in Gambia in 2002 where they were “turned over to US agents and flown to Afghanistan and then to Guantanamo, where they remain detained without trial or any form of judicial assistance,” the report said. The men’s abduction was helped “by partly

erroneous information” supplied by British internal spy agency MI5.

The committee also condemned the treatment of Binyam Mohammed, an Ethiopian citizen and UK resident who was arrested in Pakistan before being sent to Morocco. His lawyer described to the committee what the report called “horrific torture” and interrogation by Moroccan authorities that appears “to have been inspired by information supplied by the UK.”

The MEPs also referred to the rendition of Martin Mubanga, a British citizen arrested in Zambia in 2002 and flown to Guantanamo Bay. It said he was interrogated by British officials at the US detention centre in Cuba where he was held and tortured for four years before being released without trial.

The European parliament report, while highly critical of individual EU and national government personnel and government policies regarding extraordinary rendition, ultimately seeks to repair some of the damage caused to the carefully crafted reputation of European imperialism by the damning evidence of collusion with the CIA that leaked out in late-2005.

Sarah Ludford, the vice-chair of the committee, expressed this concern when she stated that a credible response to the exposure of such widespread human rights abuses was necessary for the “EU’s aspirations to be a ‘human rights community.’ ”

However, the catalogue of criminality exposes the truth behind the hypocritical and self-serving posturing of the European powers, and their liberal and left apologists, as being more humane than their superpower rival. While every EU country officially opposes the US gulag at Guantanamo Bay, their participation in the CIA’s rendition network shows what value that opposition has in reality.

None of the countries indicted by the parliamentary report has admitted any wrongdoing, and the European Parliament, even if it ratifies the committee’s findings, is virtually powerless to place any binding restrictions or sanctions on the member governments.

Marching in lock step with Washington’s phoney “war on terror,” there is no significant constituency of the European bourgeoisie that is any more committed to fundamental democratic rights than are its counterparts in the United States. Rather, the Europeans have responded to the explosion of American militarism by acquiescing to the demands of their erstwhile ally across the Atlantic, in the hope that it will assist their own efforts to employ military aggression abroad and to attack democratic rights at home.



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