Kidnapping, detention, torture: US “renditions” scandal embroils whole of Europe

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The political scandal over the CIA’s transfer of alleged terrorists to overseas prisons where they are subject to torture has now embroiled governments throughout Europe.

Airplanes operated by CIA-front companies carrying detainees have landed many times at European airports before flying off to countries where the prisoners are held incommunicado and tortured, with the knowledge and even direct participation of US operatives.

According to press reports, since September 11, 2001 at least 100 prisoners have been subjected to this process of “extraordinary rendition.” Some have been kidnapped on European soil or are European citizens.

Human Rights Watch has said there is strong evidence, including the flight records of CIA jets transporting prisoners out of Afghanistan, that Poland and Romania were among countries allowing the CIA to operate secret detention centres, or “black sites.”

Allegations that the CIA has run secret prisons in Eastern European countries were first made in a *Washington Post* report by Dana Priest on November 2. The article claimed the US has maintained secret prisons in eight countries, including Thailand, Afghanistan and several eastern European states. The *Post* did not name the European countries involved at the request of American officials.

A report by Germany’s *Berliner Zeitung* said 85 CIA flights had taken off or landed at the US Rhein-Main military air base in Frankfurt between 2002 and 2004—headed to such places as Baghdad, Kabul and the Jordanian capital Amman.

An analysis for the *New York Times* of 26 planes known to be operated by CIA front companies shows 307 flights in Europe since September 2001. There were 94 flights in Germany, the most in Europe, 76 flights from Britain, 33 from Ireland, 16 from Portugal, and 15 each from Spain and the Czech Republic. A similar investigation by the British *Guardian* newspaper states that when charter flights are included, the figure for Britain rises to more than 200.

The mounting revelations of these CIA operations—all in flagrant contravention of international law and the laws of the European countries involved—are an acute embarrassment for Europe’s governments. The existence of CIA detention facilities in Europe—Poland is a European Union (EU) member state—violates the European Convention on Human Rights.

The exposure of US-organized “disappearances” of targeted individuals and their subjection to torture, and the role of European governments in allowing and covering up for these crimes, has evoked public outrage. In Britain, the human rights group Liberty has asked police to investigate allegations of the CIA’s use of United Kingdom airports for rendition purposes. Liberty has said that unless action is taken within 14 days, it will seek legal action against UK police forces for aiding and abetting in kidnap and torture.

Britain’s foreign secretary, Jack Straw, has sent a letter to Washington on behalf of the EU seeking clarification on the allegations that the CIA has torture camps in Eastern Europe. Germany’s new foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, also raised the issue during his visit to Washington.

Franco Frattini, the EU’s foremost justice official, has warned that any member state discovered to have hosted CIA prisons will face “serious consequences,” including losing its EU voting rights. The Council of Europe has opened a formal inquiry into the issue under Article 52 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Investigator Dick Marty has said he wants to examine satellite photos of the military training camp at Szymany in northeastern Poland and Kogalniceanu military airport in southern Romania.

Italian prosecutors are seeking the extradition of 22 suspected CIA operatives from the US, who are charged with abducting Egyptian national Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr in February 2003. Nasr, who had been granted political refugee status by Italy, was kidnapped on the streets of Milan by agents who, according to Italian prosecutors, were working for the CIA. He was flown to Egypt, where he says he was tortured.

Investigations have also been mounted by Spain, Sweden and Norway.

The Bush administration broke its silence on the unfolding international scandal only this week. The State Department said that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will be prepared to address the allegations of secret CIA prison camps when she visits Germany, Romania, Ukraine, and Belgium for a NATO foreign ministers meeting next week. But Washington made clear that it would not retreat from its illegal policy. Rice herself told the press, “We have never fought a war like this before where... you can’t allow someone to commit the crime before you detain them.”

The Bush administration has one great advantage in taking a hard line in the face of complaints and inquiries by EU states. It knows well what others can only speculate about: how much the European governments knew and how complicit they have been in the criminal activities of the CIA.

The December 1 edition of the *New York Times* openly raises this issue, writing that anger in Europe is accompanied by “looming embarrassment, with suspicion that Americans, in many cases, operated with the knowledge or consent of local governments.”

Daria Pesce, the lawyer for a former CIA station chief in Milan who is one of those accused of snatching Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, says, “Someone knew... I don’t think that it is possible that an American comes into Italy and kidnaps someone. It seems really unlikely.”

Giuseppe Cucchi, a former three-star Italian general and military representative to NATO, told the *Times*, “I don’t see why they shouldn’t have agreed with our secret services on an action like that... The condition

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often put on an action like that is that, 'If something comes out, we will declare that we didn't know anything.'"

There is, in fact, no possibility that Europe's governments did not know of the CIA's activities. Extraordinary renditions are official US policy. Reports and articles available on the Internet have logged the movements of planes run by the CIA ever since 2001, and the number of these aircraft has increased to over 26, with ten planes added since 9/11.

Last May, when Amnesty International condemned American human rights abuses carried out in the name of the "war on terrorism" and its secretary general called Guantánamo the "gulag of our time," the US government denounced the human rights organization. All of the European governments kept silent.

Yet in November last year, the British *Sunday Times* reported on the movements of one CIA-run jet believed to be involved in renditions. The article noted that the plane flew to 49 international destinations, including Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Afghanistan, Libya and Uzbekistan. Internet reports and photos showed it making stopovers in Portugal, Spain and the Czech Republic.

The issue of renditions gained prominence when a series of legal rulings in the United States in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal made it all but impossible to continue to hold detainees without trial at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, while denying them at least some of the rights afforded by US law. The US Supreme Court had ruled in June of 2004 that federal courts could hear habeas corpus petitions from Guantánamo detainees who were contesting their imprisonment.

The Bush administration responded last March by announcing that half of Guantánamo's 540 inmates would be transferred to prisons in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and other countries. This in effect insured that the detainees would be subject to treatment that contravenes both US and international law.

The announcement focused public attention on a worldwide network of detention facilities either set up by Washington or established as a result of its negotiations with other governments in the aftermath of 9/11.

Newspapers reported that the US was negotiating with various countries to take Guantánamo detainees. The *Times* cited a February 5 memorandum from Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld urging that pressure be placed on reluctant governments.

The most important article that appeared highlighting America's network of detention and torture facilities was by Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark in the March 19, 2005 *Guardian*. It stated that Afghanistan had become "the hub of a global system of detention centres where prisoners are held incommunicado and allegedly subjected to torture."

Michael Posner of the US legal watchdog Human Rights First, said, "The detention system in Afghanistan exists entirely outside international norms, but it is only part of a far larger and more sinister jail network that we are only now beginning to understand."

Levy and Scott-Clark reported the existence of unofficial detention facilities at Gardez, Khost, Asadabad and Jalalabad, as well as an official detention centre in Kandahar. "There are 20 more facilities in outlying US compounds and fire bases that complement a major 'collection centre' at Bagram air force base," they wrote. "The CIA has one facility at Bagram and another, known as the 'Salt Pit', in an abandoned brick factory north of Kabul. More than 1,500 prisoners from Afghanistan and many other countries are thought to be held in such jails, although no one knows for sure because the US military declines to comment."

Following 9/11, the US had "commandeered foreign jails, built cellblocks at US military bases and established covert CIA facilities that can be located almost anywhere, from an apartment block to a shipping container. Terror suspects are being processed in Afghanistan and in dozens of facilities in Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Jordan, Egypt, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the British island of Diego Garcia in the southern Indian Ocean. Those detained are held incommunicado, without charge or trial, and frequently shuttled between jails in covert air transports, giving rise to the recently coined US military expression 'ghost detainees.'"

Syria was another partner in Washington's network. Levy and Scott-Clark had obtained "prisoner letters, declassified FBI files, legal depositions, witness statements and testimony from US and UK officials, which document the alleged methods deployed in Afghanistan—shackles, hoods, electrocution, whips, mock executions, sexual humiliation and starvation—and suggest they are practised across the network."

The article also drew attention to the use of jets owned and run by CIA front companies—the issue that has now hit the headlines in Europe. Former CIA officer Robert Baer explained, "We pick up a suspect or we arrange for one of our partner countries to do it. Then the suspect is placed on civilian transport to a third country where, let's make no bones about it, they use torture. If you want a good interrogation, you send someone to Jordan. If you want them to be killed, you send them to Egypt or Syria. Either way, the US cannot be blamed as it is not doing the heavy work."

Disproving the recent claims of ignorance and expressions of outrage emanating from Europe's capitals, the article details the kidnapping of Ahmed Agiza, an Egyptian asylum seeker resident in Sweden. In December 2001, he was sent back to Egypt. He and a second Egyptian refugee, Mohammed Al-Zery, had been arrested by Swedish intelligence acting upon a request from the US: "...driven, shackled and blindfolded, to Stockholm's Bromma airport, where they were cuffed and cut from their clothes. Suppositories were inserted into both men's anuses, they were wrapped in plastic nappies, dressed in jumpsuits and handed over to an American aircrew who flew them out of Sweden on a private executive jet.

"Prisoners told us that Agiza was repeatedly electrocuted, hung upside down, whipped with an electrical flex and hospitalised after being made to lick his cell floor clean," the *Guardian* reported.

The November 21 edition of *Der Spiegel* cites another example of direct collaboration, this time involving Germany. Mohammed Haydar Zammar, a German citizen, was abducted while he was in Morocco in November 2001 and sent to a Syrian prison to be tortured. With the agreement of Syria, German officials flew to Damascus to interrogate the prisoner, whom they knew was being tortured.

Britain, Washington's closest ally, is most heavily implicated in the renditions scandal. Along with Washington, London is anxious to utilize torture without being seen to be directly culpable. On August 11 last year, the Court of Appeals had ruled that evidence extracted by torture was admissible in UK law. When this was challenged, the Blair government requested a decision by the Law Lords on the issue, which is still pending.

Washington's actions recall the reign of state terror practiced by US-backed military regimes in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, in which thousands of students, trade unionists, left-wing political figures and journalists were "disappeared," tortured and executed. What is remarkable is not that protests and investigations have been organised by EU states, but that Europe's response has been so belated and muted.

Europe's governments are clearly worried by the possible political fallout from their alliance with an administration that utilises methods, borrowed from the handbook of Hitler's Nazi regime, that were inflicted on the people of German-occupied Europe during World War II.

But all are complicit in Washington's criminal actions. Whatever their reservations about Iraq, they all signed up to the so-called "war on terror" that has been used to legitimise kidnapping, detention and torture. They too are breaking with democratic norms, which are, in the end, incompatible with colonial subjugation and the destruction of workers' living standards carried out at the behest of an international financial oligarchy.

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