

Rice defends illegal “renditions,” threatens to reveal European complicity

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US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has responded to Europe’s appeals for information regarding Washington’s illegal practice of rendition by making clear that the practice will continue. In an attempt to turn the tables on European critics, she has implied that should Europe continue to make such demands, Washington will expose the complicity of the European governments, which allowed their airports to be used by CIA planes transporting prisoners to third countries and secret CIA-run prisons.

Renditions involve the moving of alleged terrorists, without any judicial process, to countries where, according to the US government, American law does not apply. Washington routinely sends these prisoners to countries which have been cited by the US State Department for practicing torture. “Extraordinary rendition” refers to the kidnapping of terrorist suspects on foreign soil before they are spirited away to detention centres overseas.

Rice begins her tour of Europe in Berlin and is to visit Brussels for a meeting with NATO foreign ministers. Prior to her visit, at least eight European countries, as well as the European Union itself, requested clarification over whether the CIA had landed planes involved in rendition operations. German and British airports are alleged to have been used most frequently.

Speaking Monday at Andrews Air Force Base before departing for Germany, Rice stated that the US had indeed moved suspects by plane overseas and had done so for decades. She claimed this was not in order to facilitate torture and was permissible under international law. She refused to say whether the CIA ran secret prisons abroad, stating, “We cannot discuss information that would compromise the success of intelligence, law enforcement, and military operations. We expect other nations share this view.” Poland and Romania have both been identified as likely sites of such CIA facilities, along with six other nations.

Rice then turned her fire directly on Europe. She stressed that European countries often benefited from, and assisted in, US intelligence-gathering, declaring, “Some

governments choose to cooperate with the United States in intelligence, law enforcement, or military matters. That cooperation is a two-way street.”

She added, “The United States has respected—and will continue to respect—the sovereignty of other countries.”

This seemingly innocuous phrase is, in fact, a threat levelled against Europe. In saying the US respects the sovereignty of other nations, Rice is implying that European governments were informed about the CIA flights. More generally, she is reminding Europe that it has collaborated with the US in every aspect of the so-called war against terror, including renditions and other practices that openly violate international law.

Speaking on December 4, President Bush’s national security advisor Stephen Hadley sounded the same theme, saying that to speak publicly about renditions “would put countries who are cooperating with us at risk.” His remarks were designed to go beyond the eight countries that are said to be directly involved in the detention and torture of prisoners “rendered” by the CIA.

Such threats will not be lost on Europe’s capitals, and Rice will no doubt be even more explicit in her private meetings with European officials. One European diplomat told Reuters, “It’s very clear they want European governments to stop pushing on this... They were stuck on the defensive for weeks, but suddenly the line has toughened up incredibly.”

There is little wonder that Europe’s governments want to formally distance themselves from their US ally, and at the same time fear the possibility of the US exposing their own complicity. Public anger over renditions is growing.

In Britain, for example, the human rights group Liberty is to table an amendment to the Civil Aviation Bill that would oblige the Home Secretary to force any aircraft travelling through UK airspace suspected of extraordinary rendition to land and be searched by police and customs. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), acting on behalf of an unnamed man who was allegedly flown to a secret CIA prison in Afghanistan and tortured, is threatening to sue the

CIA for breaching US and international law. The ACLU is also threatening to name corporations that own or operate the aircraft used to transport detainees.

Most worrying of all, Britain's all-party parliamentary group set up to investigate the renditions scandal has commissioned a report from the Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University's School of Law. The report finds that the British government of Prime Minister Tony Blair would be guilty of breaking international law if it allowed CIA rendition planes to land at British airports.

The report concludes: "A state which aids or assists another state in the commission of an internationally wrongful act by the latter is internationally responsible for doing so... Accomplice liability has been recognised in international criminal law since at least the Nuremberg trials."

Evidence that Britain and many other European governments are indeed accomplices in a criminal conspiracy continues to be made public. Many of these stories originate in the US media.

Germany is where CIA flights are known to have landed most frequently—on at least 437 occasions. It is not credible that so many flights could have occurred without the knowledge of the government. Such suspicions are highlighted in a report in the December 4 *Washington Post* alleging that Germany kept silent when one of its citizens was captured, rendered and wrongfully detained by the CIA. The CIA later admitted that the man had been innocent of any crime.

Khaled el Masri was arrested in Macedonia on December 31, 2003, handed over to US officials, and flown to a secret prison in Afghanistan. According to the *Post*, flight logs show that a plane registered to a CIA-front company flew out of Macedonia on the day Masri says he was sent to Afghanistan. He was returned to Europe five months later when the CIA realised they had the wrong man.

The newspaper reports, "Masri was held for five months largely because the head of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center's al Qaeda unit 'believed he was someone else,' one former CIA official said. 'She didn't really know. She just had a hunch.'"

In May 2004, prior to Masri's release, Daniel Coats, then-US ambassador to Germany, told German Interior Minister Otto Schily that Masri had been wrongfully detained. "There was also a request: that the German government not disclose what it had been told even if Masri went public," the *Post* writes. This request was honoured by German officials, including by the prosecutor charged with investigating the case.

Time magazine also makes the telling point: "Countries

that may publicly poke a finger in Uncle Sam's eye can still work with him hand-in-glove behind the scenes. France, whose opposition to Washington's Iraq policy requires no précis, hosts a secret joint operations center with the CIA in Paris called Alliance Base, and has a relationship with the Agency that would astonish the 'freedom fries' crowd."

The *Washington Post's* article serves to emphasise the enormity of the crimes carried out by Washington, with which the European powers are complicit.

It estimates that the CIA and other intelligence agencies have captured some 3,000 people in their anti-terror operations. Many of those detained were innocent of any crime and were arrested on the flimsiest of pretexts. There is no way of verifying who they are because there is no machinery to check the evidence against them, other than the say-so of the CIA. An official told the *Post* that one man wrongfully detained was a college professor who had given an Al Qaeda member who subsequently fingered him a bad grade.

The CIA operation is run by the Counter Terrorism Center (CTC). According to the *Post*, kidnappings and disappearances are carried out by the "Rendition Group, made up of case officers, paramilitaries, analysts and psychologists. Their job is to figure out how to snatch someone off a city street, or a remote hillside, or a secluded corner of an airport where local authorities wait.

"Members of the Rendition Group follow a simple but standard procedure: Dressed head to toe in black, including masks, they blindfold and cut the clothes off their new captives, then administer an enema and sleeping drugs. They outfit detainees in a diaper and jumpsuit for what can be a day-long trip."

The numbers of CIA officers involved in anti-terror operations quadrupled after 9/11 from 300 to 1,200. The CTC was headed initially by J. Cofer Black, who was in direct contact with President Bush and the White House.

The *Post* explains, "Bush had signed a top secret presidential finding six days after the 9/11 attacks. It authorized an unprecedented range of covert action, including lethal measures and renditions, disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks against the al Qaeda enemy, according to current and former intelligence officials. Black's attitude was exactly what some CIA officers believed was needed to get the job done."



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