

European governments make their peace with Washington on abductions, torture

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European ministers have signalled an end to any pretence of opposing America's practice of rendition, which involves shipping detainees abroad to be tortured—using European airports and even CIA bases located in eastern Europe.

Following a formal dinner in Brussels on December 7, in advance of the next day's meeting of NATO foreign ministers, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium all proclaimed themselves satisfied with reassurances by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the US abides by the Geneva Convention in its treatment of prisoners.

Speaking earlier in Ukraine, Rice said, "As a matter of... policy, the United States' obligations under the [United Nations Convention Against Torture], which prohibits cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, extends to US personnel wherever they are, whether they are in the US or outside the US."

At the dinner Wednesday, she is reported to have made similar statements. The response from the NATO and European officials was gushing.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said that the NATO allies had "received assurances" from Rice that the US fully conforms to its international agreements and has "full respect for the sovereignty" of other nations. He welcomed Washington's "adherence to international rules," particularly the UN Convention Against Torture, stating, "The US, they are our friends. I repeat, they are our friends."

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told reporters, "I think NATO and EU ministers were able to raise their concerns that we should not diverge from one another on the interpretation of international law."

"Secretary Rice promised that international agreements are not interpreted any differently in the United States than they are in Europe."

The meeting was "very satisfactory for all of us," he added.

Dutch Foreign Minister Ben Bot said he left Wednesday night's dinner "very satisfied" by Rice's comments.

Belgian Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht said that Rice had reassured him that "at no time did the US agree to inhumane acts or torture, that they have always respected the sovereignty of the states concerned, and even if terrorists are not covered by the Geneva conventions, they have still applied the principles governing those Geneva conventions... I've the impression all ministers generally welcomed that."

NATO Secretary General Jaap De Hoop Scheffer was similarly effusive. Rice had "cleared the air. You will not see this discussion continuing."

He was as good as his word. The next day NATO foreign ministers met to discuss increasing the organisation's military presence in Afghanistan to allow Washington to reduce the number of US troops stationed there. The issue of covert prisons and detainee treatment was not even discussed.

These statements from key European Union member nations make clear that the EU as a whole has no intention of seriously investigating, let alone opposing, Washington's defiance of international law and its practice of abducting alleged terrorists and shipping them either to secret CIA prisons or to third countries, where they are held indefinitely and without legal recourse, and subjected to legally proscribed, brutal interrogation methods.

Human rights groups rejected Rice's reassurances. The US-based Human Rights Watch said that the Bush administration's definition of torture was so narrow that it left open the possibility of US personnel employing a range of abusive and illegal techniques, such as "waterboarding," deprivation of food, sleep or heat, and other supposedly non-fatal forms of physical and psychological duress.

"We need to know whether they are defining torture and

cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment in the way that most people have defined it for many, many years,” said Tom Malinowski. “My impression is that, for them, only something that leaves physical scars counts as torture.”

Rice never defined what she meant by cruel and degrading treatment. In any event, her claim that US personnel are not involved in torture counts for nothing given what is already known about the sordid practices at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. It is all the more cynical given that renditions are carried out as a means of avoiding directly implicating the US in torture by utilising private contractors or interrogators in foreign countries to do Washington’s dirty work.

Even as Rice was making her statements in Kiev and Brussels, the Bush administration and congressional Republicans were opposing a resolution that would bar the use of torture against detainees held by the US. Moreover, Rice never said, nor did anyone demand that she say, that the US would stop doing anything it is presently doing in the name of the so-called “global war on terror.” Rice admitted nothing and pledged to do nothing. She simply made bald and utterly non-credible pro forma assertions of US fidelity to international law.

It should also be noted that under international law, a country must allow the International Red Cross access to detention facilities, so as to check official claims about the treatment and condition of prisoners. The US has flatly denied the International Red Cross any information about, let alone access to, its secret prisons, and all but blocked the international body from inspecting known facilities such as Guantánamo Bay and prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For much of this year, reports have appeared in the media and on the Internet of hundreds of flights by CIA planes to detention facilities of foreign governments or secret “black sites” run by the CIA.

Several former detainees have made public how they were tortured, including European citizens. Only this week, Khaled al-Masri, a German citizen of Lebanese descent who was abducted and tortured, took out a legal case against the US government. Italian prosecutors are still seeking the extradition of 22 CIA operatives they say were involved in snatching Egyptian political refugee Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr from the streets of Milan.

More than eight countries, as well as the European Union, had begun investigations into CIA flights, kidnappings and black sites. Yet, all of this supposedly counts for nothing in the face of evasive statements by Rice.

The stance taken by Germany’s foreign minister follows that of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who also pronounced her satisfaction with Rice’s hollow assurances earlier this week. At least one investigation in Europe, that by Spanish authorities on the island of Mallorca into the use of its airports to transfer terror suspects, has already been abandoned. Investigators proclaimed that they had found no “relevant evidence of a crime,” following which Spain’s attorney general, Candido Conde-Pumpido, said he did not believe that the issue would be taken up by the national court in Madrid.

Amnesty International estimates that the CIA made 800 flights over Europe in the 2001—2005 period. And the American TV network ABC reported this week that the CIA only closed its secret prisons in Romania and Poland last month.

The scale of what has been revealed excludes any possibility that the European powers were ignorant of America’s criminal actions. There are already reports in the public domain of how the Swedish and German governments have worked with the CIA in order to gain access to evidence extracted through torture. The British government of Tony Blair has unsuccessfully been seeking the right to use evidence extracted through torture overseas to detain terror suspects in the UK.

However, Europe’s response is not determined solely by whether they directly collaborated in renditions. All of the European powers—whatever the position they adopted over the Iraq war—are full participants in the so-called war on terror, of which renditions are a key feature. Like Washington, their concern is to legitimise their predatory ambitions in the Middle East and internationally, while strengthening their repressive powers in order to deal with domestic opposition to the destruction of living conditions and vital social provisions.

Throughout the continent, governments are mounting a sustained offensive against democratic rights—a shift towards authoritarian forms of rule that finds its most developed expression in the state of emergency that remains in effect in France. That is why they have no intention of challenging the lawlessness of the Bush administration and why Paris chooses this moment to proclaim Europe as “America’s friend.”



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