

Collaboration with CIA renditions highlights France's assault on democratic rights

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The International Federation of Human Rights (IFHR) and the French League for Human Rights (LHR) last month announced they were “filing a complaint with the Public Prosecutor of the Administrative Court of the City of Bobigny against arbitrary detentions, illegal confinement, torture, and violations of the Third Geneva Convention on the fate of prisoners of war.”

The IFHR and the LHR are demanding that judicial inquiries be made into the use by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of secret planes “within the context of the war against terror to take prisoners illegally to secret detention centres.” They assert they have information that the CIA has used these planes in cases where “intensive interrogations take place.”

According to the two organizations, the practice involves “torture and mistreatment ... prohibited by the United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Punishment or Treatment of 10 December 1984.” They add, “There is now every reason to fear that such practices have been carried out on prisoners while they were being transported on two suspect flights.”

The communiqué goes on to say: “On at least two occasions, planes have landed at French airports (Brest-Guipavas and Paris-Le Bourget) under suspicious circumstances, and without any clear indication of their destination. The greatest fears relate to the transport of CIA prisoners via these flights and, as a result, IFHR and LHR demand that all necessary investigations into these activities be carried out as soon as possible by the court.” It continues by saying the organizations “intend to emphasise the initial responsibility of the French authorities, to inquire into the activities and to pursue their perpetrators.”

The practice of CIA renditions, in which, in order to avoid legal restraints on torture, assassination and arbitrary imprisonment, detainees are taken to countries where such prohibitions are ignored, has become a source of embarrassment for Washington's European allies, as evidence of their own complicity has mounted. French officials have issued disingenuous statements suggesting that they were unaware of the cargos being carried by the two identified CIA airplanes that stopped over in France.

The *Nouvel Observateur* web site on December 5 quoted Baptiste Mattéi, spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, who said, “It is quite possible that there were these planes.... The issue is to know what these planes were transporting.”

The site carried an interview on December 2 with an anonymous former French intelligence officer who defended the secret services by claiming, “If the CIA landed there, our secret services knew that, but did not necessarily know what was in the planes.” He added, however, that “if politicians have given their approval, they know what the airplane carries.”

There is, in fact, a long history of close collaboration between the anti-terrorist agencies of France and the US, which has been particularly intense since the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001. The former Plural Left government of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin set

up a joint centre for anti-terrorism in Paris in 2002 called Alliance Base.

Dana Priest wrote in the *Washington Post* of November 18, 2005 that this centre was part of a network of joint facilities in more than two dozen countries “where US and foreign intelligence officers work side by side to track and capture suspected terrorists and to destroy or penetrate their networks.”

These CTICs (Counterterrorist Intelligence Centres), the *Post* continued, “make daily decisions on when and how to apprehend suspects, whether to whisk them off to other countries for interrogation and detention... Virtually every capture or killing of a suspected terrorist outside Iraq since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks—more than 3,000 in all—was the result of foreign intelligence services’ work alongside the agency, the CIA deputy director of operations told a congressional committee in a closed-door session earlier this year.”

Priest affirmed that “in Paris, as US-French acrimony peaked over the Iraq invasion in 2003, the CIA and French intelligence services were creating the agency’s only multinational operations centre and executing worldwide sting operations.... Codenamed Alliance base, [it] includes representatives from Britain, France, Germany, Canada and Australia.”

The US Homeland Security Department-funded site, MIPT Knowledge Base, makes yearly summaries of French anti-terrorist activity. In the 2001 entry, it pointed out that “following the attacks on the United States, France played an important role in crafting a UN response to terrorism and joined other NATO allies in invoking Article 5, the mutual-defence clause of the NATO treaty. Paris quickly granted three-month blanket overflight clearances for US aircraft and offered air, naval, and ground assets that were integrated into Operation Enduring Freedom.”

The MIPT noted that, in November 2001, the Jospin government passed the “everyday security” bill “which allows for expanded police searches and telephone and internet monitoring.... Finance Minister [Laurent] Fabius responded rapidly to US requests to freeze Taliban and Al-Qaeda assets ... the French were among the principal advocates for creating the UN Security Council’s counterterrorism committee, and they cooperated with US officials in G-8 counterterrorism meetings.”

The MIPT entry for 2002 began: “France has provided outstanding military, judicial, and law-enforcement support to the war against terrorism. France has made a significant military contribution to Operation Enduring Freedom, including some 4,200 military personnel supporting operations in Afghanistan. The Charles de Gaulle carrier battle group flew more than 2,000 air reconnaissance, strike and electronic warfare missions over Afghanistan. France provided close air support to US and Coalition forces during Operation Anaconda.”

The site made a point of noting that “in October, the Justice Ministry decided to add a fifth investigative magistrate to its specialised team of anti-terrorist judges.”

In the 2003 overview, the MIPT site reported: “France is currently changing its domestic legislation to incorporate provisions of the European Arrest Warrant and to strengthen its procedures for international

judicial cooperation.”

The French government, in alliance with Germany and Russia, opposed Washington’s decision to invade Iraq in March of 2003 in defiance of the United Nations’ decision-making procedures. France sought to use the mechanisms of the UN to protect its own oil interests in Iraq and the Middle East against Washington’s bid to establish US hegemony. This, however, did not affect Franco-American intelligence collaboration against forces deemed a threat to the great power scramble for control over the world’s strategic resources.

American intelligence and foreign relations officials were acutely embarrassed by and opposed to the anti-French hysteria stoked up by US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld. Another article by Dana Priest of the *Washington Post* (April 3, 2005), on French-US collaboration, noted: “French fries became ‘freedom fries’ on Air Force One [the US president’s plane] and in congressional cafeterias, Rumsfeld prohibited general officers from telephoning their French counterparts, grounded US planes at the Paris Air Show and disinvited the French from Red Flag, a major US military exercise in which they had participated for decades.”

The article continued: “Three months into the dispute, the State Department and the CIA made a case for France, citing its intelligence cooperation. Bush eventually told Rumsfeld to desist, according to two former State Department officials. Then-Secretary of State Colin L. Powell wrote a memo saying that punishing the French was not US policy.... But Rumsfeld persisted a year later, excluding the French Air Force from the Red Flag exercise in 2004.... The intelligence services tried to insulate themselves from the fray... ‘The French were keen on demonstrating there was no drop-off at all,’ said Wolff, the US diplomat here.”

The extent of French involvement in US neo-colonial military interventions goes far beyond sharing intelligence and counterterrorist activities. Another official American site, National Defense, in its update of April 7, 2005, made a detailed survey of French military capability and strategic deployment. Noting that France was fully participating in the ongoing transformation of NATO and had several officers posted at the Strategic Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia, it pointed out that French generals recently took command of two major NATO forces: ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) in Afghanistan and KFOR in Kosovo.

The site stated that in Afghanistan, France was the second largest partner of the US after Germany. French contributions included a contingent of 900 in the ISAF, 11 percent of its troops, and several naval vessels and aircraft.

The Associated Press on August 29, 2005 reported French Air Force Colonel Gilles Michel, speaking from Afghanistan’s Bagram air base, as saying: “We told the Americans, ‘if you need some assets, we will provide them.’” Michel said France’s current deployment was its largest since the Afghan campaign’s early days, including 500 French pilots, air controllers and ground crew newly arrived at US-operated bases in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Qatar.

What is little known by the French people, who massively opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq and largely believed that the French government was opposed to the war, is the fact that France has made an important military contribution to the occupying forces.

The Associated Press article reported French and US officials as saying that “France still takes no direct role in Iraq.... But the French-led sea patrols between Pakistan and the Horn of Africa indirectly bolster the US mission there by preventing sea-borne aid for Iraqi insurgents or Gulf-based terrorists allied to them.... Up to a dozen French ships patrol the seas around Saudi Arabia, East Africa, Iran and Pakistan, halting vessels heading for the Strait of Hormuz, which guards the entrance to the Persian Gulf and Iraq.”

An essential reason for the CIA’s choice of Paris as the location for

Alliance Base is the sweeping authority of France’s five anti-terrorist judges, led by Jean-Louis Bruguière, which includes the powers of arrest, detention and prosecution throughout France and its possessions.

Craig Whitlock, writing in the *Washington Post* on November 2, 2004, pointed out: “Armed with some of the strictest anti-terrorism laws and policies in Europe, the French government has aggressively targeted Islamic radicals and other people deemed to be a potential terrorist threat. While other countries debate the proper balance between security and individual rights, France has experienced scant public dissent over tactics that would be controversial, if not illegal, in the United States and some other countries.”

The ability of Bruguière to hold suspects for up to three years in provisional detention, while gathering evidence, coupled with the very vague provisions of the crime of “association with malefactors,” means that whole sections of the French population are subject to state terror and intimidation. The new anti-terrorism law, passed last year without opposition from the Socialist Party, has doubled the penalty for the above-cited offence to 20 years in prison. Bruguière has boasted: “There is no equivalent anywhere else in Europe.”

The DST (Directorate of Surveillance of the Territory), France’s domestic intelligence agency, employs a large number of Arabic speakers and Muslims to infiltrate radical groups.

At the same time, the powers wielded by French examining magistrates have given the French state enormous latitude to ignore legal limitations on arbitrary arrest that exist in other countries.

One example is the case of Christian Ganczarski, a German national and alleged Al Qaeda operative. Saudi officials prepared to deport Ganczarski to Germany, but German officials said they did not have the evidence to arrest him.

The Saudis sent him on a flight to Germany with a connection in Paris. He was arrested by French police on June 2, 2003. He was still being held in France 17 months later, without any proof of terrorist activities or charges made against him, on suspicion of being involved in a Tunisian bombing. The fact that French nationals were among the casualties of the bombing gave Bruguière and his team, under French law, the power to hold, virtually indefinitely, this German citizen.

Michel Tubiana, a lawyer and president of the French League for Human Rights, declared: “There has been a definite erosion of civil liberties in France, and not just with terrorism. We’re seeing things that would have been unthinkable 10 years ago.”



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