Britain: Government minister admits US “rendition” planes landed in UK

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The government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair has admitted that aircraft believed to have been used by the CIA to transport prisoners to secret detention centres did land at British military airfields. The admission was made by Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram in a letter to Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell.

Ingram disclosed that two aircraft, a Boeing 737 and a Gulfstream, landed 14 times at RAF (Royal Air Force) Northolt and RAF Brize Norton between October 2003 and May 2004.

The flights were identified by the *Guardian* newspaper in September 2005, which reported it had seen evidence that the Ministry of Defence “has details of the flights, including their origin and destination.”

Previously, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had said that the government was “unaware” of any CIA flights since 1998 using UK airspace and transporting detainees.

Ingram’s admission came after Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman Nick Clegg threatened to complain to the parliamentary ombudsman unless the Ministry of Defence gave details of flights that had landed at RAF airfields. Ingram had argued such records could be provided only at “disproportionate cost” and that “the information is not recorded centrally.”

Ingram now claims that his disclosure of 14 flights does not contradict previous government statements. His letter does not state that the aircraft were used by the CIA, but the two planes are known to be CIA.

The Boeing 737, registered N313P, made flights to Tripoli in Libya, Luqa in Malta, and Shannon, Ireland. The Gulfstream, registered first as N379P and later as N8068V, made stops en route to Amman in Jordan, Marrakesh in Morocco, and Doha in Qatar.

Last month, the UK National Air Traffic Services (NATS) confirmed that aircraft with CIA tail numbers had made “around 200 journeys” through British airspace over the past five years. A spokesman said guardedly, “[T]hey might have been CIA flights taking officials rather than people in orange boiler suits.” The NATS disclosure was also made in a letter responding to parliamentary questions by the Liberal Democrats.

That letter said that of four aircraft identified from records as having been used by the CIA, “three have received an ATC [air traffic control service] from NATS on a number of occasions in the past five years. We are not prepared to offer a number because we are not confident that such a number would be robust.” However, on Channel Four News, NATS gave the figure of around 200 flights.

The latest admissions confirm that Britain is complicit in the CIA practice of “extraordinary rendition”—i.e., flying captives to secret prisons located in countries notorious for carrying out torture. It also exposes repeated government claims that it was unaware of any rendition flights after 1998, that no records were kept, or that those records that had been kept had subsequently been destroyed. On this basis, the Blair government has rejected calls for a full investigation into rendition flights, insisting there is no evidence of any illegal activity.

Even following the NATS disclosure, Foreign Secretary Straw continued the government stonewalling. “We know of no occasion where there has been a rendition through UK territory, or indeed over UK territory, nor do we have any reason to believe that such flights have taken place without our knowledge,” he claimed.

However, a report by the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) has criticised government

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ministers for failing in their "duty to investigate" allegations that US rendition flights passed through British airspace. Prime Minister Blair dismissed the criticism, saying, "There is no evidence that I know of that any of these 200 flights have been used for rendition."

People "should not assume" the US was flying terror suspects in and out of Britain without asking permission, he went on. "There is a procedure in place where the Americans ask our permission if they want to render. I am not prepared simply to assume that they are breaching that undertaking."

But a government memo written by an official in the Foreign Office and leaked to the *New Statesman* magazine states, "The papers we have unearthed so far suggest there could be more such cases.... We cannot say that we have received no such request for the use of UK territory."

The memo also suggested that the government was aware that rendition was rarely legal. Foreign Office lawyers had advised that the practice was "almost certainly illegal" and any British co-operation "would also be illegal." They also questioned whether the US definition of torture was consistent with international law.

Straw has now been recalled to the FAC, which said there were "serious concerns" over the rendition allegations. Ministers had a duty to investigate the claims, said the FAC report, adding it was necessary "to make clear to the USA that any extraordinary renditions to states where suspects may be tortured is completely unacceptable."

The FAC report also criticised government attempts to transport terror suspects to countries known to practice torture by obtaining "memoranda of understanding" from recipient nations that returned individuals would not be mistreated. Such memoranda were legally "questionable" and must not be used as "a fig leaf to disguise the real risk of torture" the report said.

Straw has since indicated his preference to only talk in private to the Commons intelligence committee.

Blair's is not the only government attempting to cover-up details of its collusion with Washington. The *New York Times* has alleged that the German Intelligence Service handed over a copy of Saddam Hussein's plan for the defence of Baghdad to US military commanders one month before the Iraq war began.

The Christian Democratic-Social Democratic coalition government led by Angela Merkel has also been accused of collaborating with renditions, including the CIA's 2001 abduction, detention and torture of Khaled al-Masri, a German of Lebanese descent.

Last month, the New York-based Human Rights Watch told a committee of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) that there is circumstantial evidence indicating the CIA transported suspected terrorists captured in Afghanistan to Poland and Romania, and it identified the two countries as possible hosts of secret US-run detention facilities.

At the same time, the Council of Europe publicly named five countries that have failed to explain what steps they are taking to protect people from being detained and mistreated during rendition.

The Council, which oversees the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights, said that Belgium, Bosnia, Georgia, Italy and San Marino had missed the deadline of midnight on February 21 for submissions on how they are meeting their obligations under international law.

Attempts by European governments to deny knowledge that their airports were used by the CIA to fly detainees to facilities where they could be tortured unraveled last year when a document obtained by the civil rights group Statewatch confirmed that the European Union agreed to such flights in 2003 as part of a wider programme of joint security operations with the Bush administration.

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