

# Amnesty International report exposes European complicity in secret US rendition programme

## Part 1: The fate of three Yemenis

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*The following is the first of a two-part article.*

The CIA's illegal abduction and secret imprisonment of alleged terror suspects has come into sharper focus in recent months. At the beginning of April, the human rights organization *Amnesty International* presented new details on the so-called practice of "rendition." The report also exposes the complicity of the European governments in the illegal activities of the CIA.

The *Amnesty* report titled "Below the radar: Secret flights to torture and 'disappearance'" charts in minute detail the odyssey of three Yemeni citizens through four US secret prisons in Afghanistan, Djibouti, and probably Eastern Europe, and documents the hundreds of landings and take-offs at European airports by planes used by the CIA for illegal abductions.

The statements of three Yemeni men whom *Amnesty* was able to contact provide detailed information about the worldwide network of American secret prisons, or so-called "black sites." Their descriptions show the systematic and organized nature of the operations carried out by the CIA in abducting, imprisoning, and abusing such individuals.

Muhammad Faraj Bashmilah and Salah Nasir Salim 'Ali Qaru were arrested in October 2003 in Jordan and later handed over to US security agencies, while Muhammad Abdullah Salah al-Assad was arrested in Tanzania and transferred directly into US custody. It was more than 18 months before all three were turned over to the Yemeni authorities, who then detained them for a further nine months before they were finally released in March 2006. At no time were any terror-related charges laid against the three men, and, indeed, they were never even told what they were suspected of having done. Their

only crime was that of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Muhammad Bashmilah and Salah Qaru were flown by US security forces directly to Afghanistan and placed in a secret internment camp there run exclusively by American personnel.

Strict and comprehensive security procedures operated in the camp. The prisoners were held in solitary confinement in single cells measuring two by three meters, in which they were permanently under surveillance by two video cameras. They were shackled to a ring in the floor of the cell by a chain that was so short that they were unable to reach the cell door.

When taken for questioning, they were hooded and placed in handcuffs before the leg irons were unchained from the ring. The hood contained a loop that could be drawn tightly around the neck "when necessary".

Muhammad al-Assad was first flown from Tanzania to Djibouti, where he was held for several weeks and cross-examined by two US security personnel who indicated they came from the FBI. From Djibouti, al-Assad was transported to Afghanistan, before being moved again with Salah Qaru and Muhammad Bashmilah at the end of April 2004.

For this flight, the men were taken individually from their cells; black-masked guards put them in diapers, overalls, and hoods. Their arms and legs were bound, with the chains being attached to a belt around the waist in order to prevent any movement. Gags and headphones were also used to prevent the prisoners speaking among themselves or with the guards.

Based on the estimated transportation time by plane, helicopter and car both on the way to their new prison

camp and when leaving there 13 months later to return to the Yemen, *Amnesty* assumes the men were taken to a camp in Eastern Europe. Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina are considered possible states in which a secret prison could be based.

Other evidence cited by the three Yemenis also suggests they were held in Eastern Europe.

There were big variations in temperature and the winters were colder than any they had previously experienced. They described their meals as typically European with pizza and sandwiches. The labels on yoghurt cartons, cheese, water bottles and other food had always been very carefully removed.

The sanitary facilities were modern and looked European, and the toilets faced toward Mecca, which would probably indicate they were not in a country with a Muslim majority. The prisoners were given prayer schedules downloaded from the [islamicfinder.org](http://islamicfinder.org) Web site, which the men could see at the bottom of the printouts, and were only allowed to pray at sunset. The variation in times they were permitted to pray, taking into account daylight savings, would indicate a location in one of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe.

The three men were held in solitary confinement, without being allowed any contact with fellow prisoners. Speaking to the website *Telepolis*, Ferdinand Muggenthaler from the German section of *Amnesty* provided further information about the circumstances of internment in Eastern European secret prisons: "Their cells were bare, they were permanently exposed to noise and had to live under artificial light, since they were not permitted any exercise outside. The guards were always masked; the only man they personally saw was the apparent director, who told them of their release."

The security measures and monitoring systems make it improbable that the camp was used for questioning "unimportant" suspects. One of the men estimates that each week from his section alone, 20 prisoners were led individually to take a shower. It is not known how many sections comprised the camp as a whole.

Muhammad al-Assad, Salah Qaru and Muhammad Bashmilah were finally transferred to the Yemeni authorities in May 2005, under instructions by the US security forces that they be further incarcerated until documentation was transferred from Washington.

The documents never arrived and the Yemeni authorities received no information from the US about what charges the three men faced nor why they should

continue to be kept in prison.

After nine months, they were finally taken to court on the fictitious charge of having falsified passports. They were sentenced to two years' imprisonment but were then released on account of the 18 months they had spent in US internment camps and the nine months in a Yemeni prison. The three were finally freed some 30 months after their initial detention. Nevertheless, they must report to the local police station each day and are not allowed to leave Aden.

Muhammad al-Assad lost his business in Tanzania and is now deeply in debt, Salah Qaru and Muhammad Bashmilah have no possibility of returning to their families in Indonesia. All three suffer from psychological trauma due to their illegal imprisonment and the torture they experienced.

Ferdinand Muggenthaler commented: "In the case of the three Yemeni men, the CIA obviously saw no more grounds for detaining them. We must fear however that some people are being treated even more badly."

The secret nature of the abductions and imprisonment under the rendition programme means the real number of victims of this practice can only be estimated with difficulty. There is neither a formal indictment nor a report to any state authorities or to the families about where the prisoners are. The victims do not have any access to lawyers or other legal aid; they have literally vanished from sight.

*Amnesty* estimates that the number of victims of renditions amounts to at least several hundred. Last year, the Egyptian prime minister admitted that various US services had brought some 60 to 70 prisoners to his country. Egypt is accused of routinely torturing prisoners. One former CIA agent also reported that several hundred prisoners had been flown by the US to secret prisons in the Middle East. The actual number could be far higher, since many victims remain "disappeared" to this day and their families, fearing new reprisals, only rarely provide any information.

*To be continued*



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