

Amnesty International documents European complicity in secret US rendition programme

Part 2: Collaborating with CIA kidnappers

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29 April 2006

The following is the second of a two-part article. The first part was posted April 28.

New details on the practice of illegal kidnapping and the secret internment of alleged terror suspects carried out by the US secret service agency, the CIA, emerged in a report issued by the human rights organisation *Amnesty International* earlier this month. (See “Below the radar: Secret flights to torture and ‘disappearance’”).

The evidence presented by Amnesty on the practice of “renditions” and American secret prisons is strikingly comprehensive. While some details are already well known, the report makes clear the extent to which European governments were prepared to look the other way and even indulge in open cooperation with the illegal CIA practices.

In 1995, then-US President Bill Clinton had already approved the practice of abducting alleged terror suspects from foreign countries. At the time, however, the official goal was to bring these persons to the US in order to place them on trial. After September 11, 2001, the entire programme was put exclusively into the hands of the CIA—and “terror suspects” were no longer taken to the US. Instead, they were brought for interrogation to secret prisons located in Syria, Jordan or Egypt. European airports were regularly used as transit stopovers for planes carrying those kidnapped. In other cases, the CIA directly kidnapped suspects from European countries.

The German government had no problems with this practice. Two German citizens were kidnapped by the CIA as they travelled abroad: Khaled el-Masri, who was abducted in Macedonia, then transported to Afghanistan and tortured; and Muhammad Haydar Zammar, who was kidnapped in Morocco and incarcerated in the notorious Far’ Falastin prison in Syria.

According to the official story, German authorities only

learned about the kidnapping of Zammar from the press. Nevertheless, six German secret service officials were sent to Damascus in order to cross-examine the German-Syrian Zammar, who was suspected of involvement in a terrorist cell. It is well known that prisoners at the Far’ Falastin are subjected to severe forms of torture.

While the German government has requested an explanation from the Syrian government for the arrest, it has done nothing to secure the release of Muhammad Zammar. In October 2004, Zammar was removed from Far’ Falastin, and since then his location remains unknown. In June 2005, his family received a final short letter, which had been passed on by the International Red Cross.

The case of Abu Omar follows a similar pattern. He was kidnapped in Italy by a group of 25 CIA agents and then flown to Egypt via the Ramstein US military airport in Germany.

Claims by Germany and other European countries that their secret services and authorities knew nothing of the activities of the CIA are utterly implausible. In Paris, the secret services of Australia, Canada, France and Germany maintain an “anti-terror centre” together with the US under the pseudonym “Alliance Base.” This is a centre for the exchange of information that is collected worldwide. According to a report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* from January, however, the US is the only country that has direct access to individuals.

Even with its modest means, the human rights organisation Amnesty was able to uncover more information over the practice of renditions, transferrals and internments than national authorities were prepared to acknowledge. Its documentation clearly reveals the extent of the network of CIA bogus companies and points out that in the most cases the same airplanes were repeatedly

used by the US secret service for “renditions”—i.e., illegal abductions.

Altogether, Amnesty documents more than 1,000 flight activities that are directly linked with the CIA and its abductions and transferrals, often involving intermediate stops at European airports. These flights were carried out by front companies such as Stevens Express, Keeler and Tate Management or Premier Executive Transport. An additional 1,600 flights involved “normal” charter planes frequently employed by the CIA.

Amongst the planes used by CIA cover firms was a Boeing 737 with the registration number N1313P, whose operations included transporting Khaled el-Masri from Macedonia to Afghanistan. The Boeing undertook direct flights from Afghanistan to Poland and Romania, and also landed no less than 76 times on German soil and on 52 occasions at British airports.

Press reports have referred most frequently to the activities of the Gulfstream V airplane with the registration number N379P in connection with “renditions.” A total of no less than 590 flight activities by this plane were documented between February 2001 and September 2005. The Gulfstream V landed 76 times in Germany and on 58 occasions in Great Britain.

Both aircraft made repeated flights to Afghanistan, Egypt, Uzbekistan, Morocco, Djibouti, Poland and Romania. In some of these countries, it has been established that the US maintains secret prisons; in other countries, their location remains unknown.

It is noteworthy that the CIA cover firms and the charter companies used by the CIA have landing and tanking rights at American military bases all over the world—a privilege shared by just 10 commercial airlines.

European governments are determined to hoodwink the public into believing that they knew nothing of the activities of the CIA on their territory. In doing so, they have declared their hands were tied by the agreement over international civil aviation, known as the Chicago Convention, which prevents the stopping or searching of private flights. This is just another lie.

According to the Chicago Convention, commercial and military international flights must be registered and approved by the respective states. On the other hand, it is not necessary to register private flights, nor can they be searched or requested to reveal their purpose. European governments are now using this principle to cover up their complicity.

In fact, every state has the right to force a plane to land and undertake a search if it has “reasonable grounds to

conclude that it is being used for any purpose inconsistent with the aims of the convention.” Such “reasonable grounds” must include the flagrant abuse of human rights involved in illegal kidnapping and internment in secret prisons. Accordingly, European governments were not only empowered, they had the international legal obligation to stop the CIA flights.

In addition, the use of charter aircraft by the CIA flights qualifies as commercial flight operations. These would then be subject to state approval, requiring the airline concerned to announce the flight eight days beforehand and naming the pilot and purpose of the flight.

The extent of involvement by the German government in these illegal practices was revealed by the false statement made by the undersecretary of state in the Foreign Office, Klaus Scharioth, who was responding to a question in the German parliament. Scharioth maintained that only military flights were subject to approval. This is legally incorrect and aimed at covering up the fact that German authorities approved the CIA flights.

Already in December of last year, the human rights organisation Statewatch published an agreement struck between the European Union and the US in 2003 that allows the US to use European airports for the transportation of “criminal foreigners.” In line with this agreement, the German government has given its official seal of approval to the CIA flights, and the connected practices of kidnapping, transferrals and internments.

In the course of investigations over CIA activities in Europe carried out by the Council of Europe, just 1 of the total of 46 European states has “officially” admitted to “delivering suspects to foreign agents in violation of the standards of international law.” The remark was made by Terry Davies, Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, in the middle of April in Strasbourg. He was unwilling, however, to identify the country in question. All other European states maintain they knew nothing about such activities and have deplored what they claim is the lack of means to be able to deal with the “violations of human rights by secret agents from friendly states.”



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