

Report details CIA prisons in Europe

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A report released Friday by the Council of Europe confirms that the CIA has used interrogation centers in Europe, including in Romania and Poland, to secretly hold and torture prisoners captured in Afghanistan, Iraq and other parts of the globe.

The report is the most detailed description of a secret program initiated by the US government, with the collaboration of Europe. In addition to Poland and Romania, many European and other powers have taken part in the program, including Germany, Italy, Britain and Canada. An earlier report from the council released in June 2006 provided some information on the program, and singled out 14 European governments for complicity.

The report was prepared by Dick Marty, a rapporteur for the council, which is tasked with monitoring human rights in Europe. It was issued the same day as a trial began in Italy against CIA agents suspected of involvement in capturing one of the prison network's victims (see today's article on CIA trial in Italy).

"What was previously just a set of allegations is now proven," the report began. Providing a portrait of lawlessness on an international scale, it noted, "Large numbers of people have been abducted from various locations across the world and transferred to countries where they have been persecuted and where it is known that torture is common practice. Others have been held in arbitrary detention, without any precise charges leveled against them and without any judicial oversight—denied the possibility of defending themselves. Still others have simply disappeared for indefinite periods and have been held in secret prisons, including in member states of the Council of Europe, the existence and operations of which have been concealed ever since."

The CIA program examined by the report is merely one part of this broader system of detention and abuse (including Guantánamo Bay as well as the network of prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan). "We believe we have shown that the CIA committed a whole series of illegal acts in Europe by abducting individuals, detaining them in secret locations and subjecting them to interrogation techniques tantamount to torture," Marty wrote.

The newest report by the Council of Europe is based on extensive testimony from current and former intelligence officials in Europe and the US. Marty also obtained raw data on flights in Europe in order to trace the movements of CIA planes transporting prisoners.

Known within the US government as the "High-Value Detainee Program," the system of secret detention was established shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001. A presidential directive signed at that time substantially increased the powers of the CIA, exploiting the "war on terror" to establish a network of prisons that could be used as part of future wars planned by the US.

In addition to Poland and Romania, the report indicates that there is some evidence that detention or processing centers were also located for some time in Diego Garcia, which is overseen by the UK but houses a US military base, and Thailand, which the report says was the location of the first CIA "black site" interrogation center.

But as the program was developed, it was Poland and later Romania that were the principal countries used by the CIA. In developing contacts with these countries—which were selected in part because of their economic dependency and their eagerness to establish relations with the US—the CIA sought to ensure unilateral control over the prisoners. The US intelligence agency established direct ties with the military of these countries, bypassing all but top-level civilian officials.

Of those who had knowledge of the program, the report singles out several high-ranking officials, including former Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski and former Romanian President Ion Iliescu.

Agreements were reached with these countries in order to allow the CIA to operate outside any legal constraints of the host country. "I consider that the stated US policy has, in fact, on the pretext of guaranteeing security, intentionally created a framework enabling it to evade all accountability," the report stated. The CIA sought deliberately to remove itself from "conventional democratic controls in the foreign countries."

While those originally transferred to Poland were alleged top officials in Al Qaeda, including Abu Zubaydah and

Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, the types of prisoners broadened as the program expanded. The report states that among those imprisoned in Romania were “leaders of branches of suspected ‘support networks’ for the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan” and “suspected leaders of terrorist factions in the Middle East,” in addition to leaders of the Taliban. These categories are broad enough to include anyone considered harmful to US interests in the Middle East.

As evidence of its assertion that secret CIA prison camps were operated in Poland and Romania between 2002 and 2005, the report cites the testimony of intelligence officials and the fact that flight recordings for CIA planes tend to correspond with the capture of significant prisoners by the US.

In addition, the team that prepared the report analyzed “hundreds of pages” of aeronautical data, which demonstrates that “in the majority of cases these CIA flights were deliberately disguised so that their actual movements would not be tracked or recorded...” Dummy flight plans were filed in order to disguise the destination of CIA-operated planes, an example of which can be found here.

The report also devotes a significant amount of space to depicting the conditions faced by prisoners caught up in the program. It describes truly horrendous conditions of isolation, psychological abuse and torture.

The conditions were designed deliberately to dehumanize prisoners and destroy their will. According to the report, prisoners were taken to their cell by “strong people who wore black outfits, masks that covered their whole faces, and dark visors over their eyes.” They were stripped and kept naked for weeks. A common feature at the beginning of the prison time was a four-month isolation regime. “During this period of over 120 days, absolutely no human contact was granted with anyone but masked, silent guards.”

Physical torture was also used. Prisoners were subjected to extreme temperatures, regulated by airflow from a single hole at the top of a prisoner’s cell. “There was a shackling ring in the wall of the cell, about half a metre up off the floor,” the report states. “Detainees’ hands and feet were clamped in handcuffs and leg irons. Bodies were regularly forced into contorted shapes and chained to this ring for long, painful periods.”

In addition, prisoners were subjected to sensory deprivation and overload. They were at times bombarded with loud music or other sounds, including “distorted verses from the Koran, or irritating noises—thunder, planes taking off, crackling laughter, the screams of women and children.”

Marty condemns in particular the role of European governments in facilitating the CIA program and attempting to obstruct the council’s investigations. “Many governments have done everything to disguise the true nature and extent

of their activities and are persistent in their uncooperative attitude,” the report states. “Some European governments have obstructed the search for the truth and are continuing to do so by invoking the concept of ‘state secrets.’ ” Within the later category, the report singles out in particular Germany and Italy. Many countries, as well as NATO, did not respond to questionnaires distributed by the investigation.

A further section of the report details the case studies of captured individuals that highlight the complicity of different governments, including Khaled El-Masri (Germany), Abu Omar (Italy) and Maher Arar (Canada).

European governments continue to deny involvement in or knowledge of the CIA interrogation program. The current Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, issued a statement that Poland has never housed a prison, and a similar statement was released by former Romanian President Iliescu.

Paul Gimigliano, a CIA spokesperson, claimed not to have read the report. Without explicitly denying its contents, he declared, in what amounted to a veiled threat, “Europe has been the source of grossly inaccurate allegations about the CIA and counterterrorism. People should remember that Europeans have benefited from the agency’s bold, lawful work to disrupt terrorist plots.”

Bush himself admitted in September 2006 the existence of the CIA prisons, at which he said an “alternative set of procedures” were used to interrogate detainees. However, he provided no information on where the prisons were located.

At the time, Bush insisted that there were no more prisoners at the secret facilities. However, he also insisted that the program was necessary and would have to be continued. In November 2006, Congress passed the Military Commissions Act with bipartisan support, granting the president wide latitude to authorize the CIA to use abusive interrogation methods. Last week, the *New York Times* reported that Bush is preparing to issue a new directive that will permit the CIA to continue abusing prisoners in countries around the world.

The full report of the Council of Europe is available here



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