

Britain: Dispatches programme exposes US renditions

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On June 11, British Channel 4 television's current affairs *Dispatches* programme featured "Kidnapped to Order." The programme presenter and investigator was Stephen Grey, author and journalist.

"Kidnapped" was an expose of the American government's rendition programme, whereby suspected terrorists are flown around the world for detention and "interrogation" in different countries. It is a method of outsourcing torture.

The programme opened with the case of the Egyptian cleric Abu Omar. He had been living in Milan, Italy, after fleeing Egypt in the early 1990s, accused of belonging to a radical Islamist group. He was kidnapped off the street in Milan in February 2003 by CIA operatives. The operatives are currently on trial, in absentia, in Italy for the kidnapping.

Omar was taken to an Italian airbase at Aviano near Venice and flown to Ramstein in Germany, then bundled on another plane and flown to Cairo. He was released by the Egyptian authorities earlier this year after having been warned by his interrogators not to speak of his ordeal. However, the *Dispatches* team met up with Omar, who said he was prepared to talk to Stephen Grey.

Omar described how he had been subjected to violence after immediately being captured and pushed into a van. Covered in blood, he began to choke and was foaming at the mouth. On the plane, he was shackled and wrapped in masking tape. He realised he was back in Egypt as he was removed from the plane and heard accents.

In Cairo, he was taken to the notorious secret police headquarters. Omar stated that his Egyptian captors told him he had been taken there on behalf of the Americans. He went on to describe how he would be beaten whilst on the ground with fists, sticks and truncheons. He recounted one occasion when he was stripped naked, his hands tied behind his back, his legs tied together and put on the floor on his stomach. He was then told he was going to be raped. At this stage he lost consciousness.

Omar's interrogation lasted 14 months, during which he met others in the secret police headquarters who had been rendered by US operatives.

The Bush administration's line is that they seek assurances that prisoners will not be abused when sent to other countries. *Dispatches* explained that the CIA knew these assurances were worthless.

The programme interviewed Tyler Drumheller, head of the CIA European division from 2001 to 2005, covering the period when

Omar was kidnapped. He candidly admitted that the CIA was aware of how the prisoners would be treated. "You can say that we asked them not to do it [abuse prisoners], which I think they did, but you have to be honest with yourself and say there is no way you can guarantee they are not going to do that.... Once you turn them over you have no control over them."

The British government has been complicit in these operations. The programme explained that the jet used to kidnap Omar had twice flown over British airspace, once on the way to pick him up in Italy and once on the way back.

The line of the British government, along with other European governments, has been to deny knowledge of and connivance in rendition flights. It argues that the CIA used civilian planes and that flights classed as civilian would mean that under international law the US had no obligation to declare how the planes were being used.

However, the *Dispatches* programme had been able to obtain flight plans for many of the flights, and in many cases they were classed as state flights. Under international law, for a state flight to enter British airspace would mean the UK government should grant permission and be warned of any possible controversial nature to the mission.

These flights criss-cross the world with destinations that include Jordan, Uzbekistan and Guantanamo Bay, and have called at countries such as Sweden, Indonesia, Thailand, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yemen. By far, the main collection point is Pakistan. *Dispatches* stated that more than 900 people have been detained in Pakistan in the "war on terror." The US pays the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's secret service, a bounty for all those handed over for rendition. So many have been "disappeared" that their families now organise rallies demanding to know their whereabouts.

Abdul Rachman, a shopkeeper, was interviewed in Peshawar near the Afghan border. He explained that he was arrested by the ISI, who told him they had done so on behalf of the Americans. He said he was stripped naked and beaten by his Pakistani guards. After a month, he was questioned by Americans. Rachman consistently told them he had no connection with terrorism. After some time, the Americans decided he was of no use to them, but he was not released. Instead he ended up in the Cairo headquarters of the Egyptian secret police.

Some in the American government/military elite are beginning to have concerns about the effectiveness of some of the methods

being used, and that they may become counterproductive. The programme interviewed Lawrence Wilkerson, who served in the US military for more than 30 years and had been Colin Powell's chief of staff at the State Department. He is now retired and is a critic of the Bush government's handling of the Iraq war.

He stated that the US was using an unsophisticated tool to detain people and there was no sophisticated method to vet them. He explained, "At the last count we had detained 30,000, 40,000, 50,000 people.... I maintain that 85 percent of those people were totally innocent...[having] no connection with terrorism."

The programme highlighted the evidence produced by an 18-month investigation of the Council of Europe (COE) on secret prisons and rendition flights in European airspace, including CIA-run prisons in Poland and Romania. A CoE investigator told the programme how he had been able to speak to contacts in the Romanian government who had worked directly with the CIA in setting up the prisons and secret flights.

According to the programme, the exposure of the European secret prisons led the US government to rethink its methods. It interviewed Jeffrey Addicott, professor at the Centre for Terrorism Law at St. Mary's University, Texas, and an enthusiastic proponent of the Bush administration's "war on terror." He said, "The CIA are now out of it.... [N]ow we'll let other people detain these people and it will be their problem and they'll have to comply with the rule of law."

One part of the new network is Africa, which is becoming increasingly important to the strategic needs of America. The programme showed footage of the Al Qaeda bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The suspected coordinator of the attacks, Fazul Abdullah, has eluded capture.

The city of Mombassa in Kenya is home to half a million Muslims. Last year, the US helped to train and fund anti-terror police units.

Following the US-backed invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia, thousands of refugees fled towards the Kenyan border. The US launched bombing raids on those fleeing in an attempt to kill suspected terrorists.

Some of those who made it to the border were picked up by Kenyan police. They included Reza, a British subject, who was informed that he was being detained on behalf of the US. The British authorities were informed, and Reza's London flat was raided. He was then interrogated by MI5 agents in Nairobi, who finally concluded he had no links with terrorism. However, he was not released and one night was awakened, taken to the airport and put on a plane, shackled and blindfolded, to Somalia. He explained there were others on the flight who had been picked up by the Kenyan police, including women and children.

Grey interviewed Alimeen Kamazi, a Muslim human rights activist in Kenya. He had gone to court to get information about the rendition flights out of Kenya. He had been able to obtain copies of three flight manifests, which showed a total of 85 people who had been illegally rendered to Somalia, a war zone. The list included women and 11 children. The wife of Fazul Abdullah and his three children were amongst them. It would appear that a new method is being used in which suspect's families are held in an attempt to smoke out the suspect.

The flights in January of this year were carried out by African Express Airways. The company confirms the flights took place, saying they would have lost their licence if they had refused. However, they would not say who had paid for the flights.

A demonstration took place in Mombassa in March this year against the policy of rendering children. The programme was able to track down one woman who had been rendered to Somalia on the flights. She subsequently had been released and returned home to her family in Tanzania, just over the Kenyan border.

The woman, 25-year-old Fatma Chandi, said she had been in Somalia with her husband but fled after the Ethiopian invasion. She had been in a group that included the wife of Fazal Abdullah. After arrest in Kenya, she was rendered with her children to Somalia. After being held in Mogadishu for 10 days, she was then rendered on to Ethiopia. Here, she was interrogated by Americans who took saliva swabs and fingerprints.

She shared a cell with other women who told her that they were questioned about their husbands. One of the women was pregnant, and after two weeks went into labour. She was transferred to hospital to have the baby, but then was returned to prison. Fatma was released without charge after three months and flew back to Tanzania. According to the programme, her husband and 70 other prisoners remain in prison.

Dispatches stated that the agency operating in the Horn of Africa is the FBI and that the CIA was staying in the background. This was confirmed by some of those who had been held, who reported being questioned by the FBI.

Grey interviewed Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who justified the imprisonment of the women. He said that when there are "international terrorists with their wives and children, you find the wife but don't find the husband and the wife is fleeing the battle field, you don't know whether the wife is just a wife, or a comrade, a colleague in the act of terrorism, you catch her you detain her." He also admitted the Americans and other countries' intelligence services had access to the prisoners.

Grey explained that he had not been able to see the prisoners, but was shown a TV interview with several of them that had been arranged by the Ethiopian state. They all claimed they were being well treated. Grey learnt afterwards that the prisoners had been told they would be freed after giving the interviews, but this proved to be just a trick.

Two of the prisoners on the TV film were later released without charge. One called Adnan, a Tunisian, gave a video testimony to *Dispatches* in which he explained how they were beaten.

The film graphically demonstrated the jettisoning of international law and democratic rights, not only by the Bush administration but by Britain and Europe. Far from the US retreating on its policy of rendition, it has opened up a new front for its activities in Africa and greatly expanded its terms of reference to include the kidnapping of woman and children.



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