

Britain: Labour government gags “extraordinary renditions” whistleblower

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Last Friday, the Labour government took out a high court injunction to prevent a former member of the British Special Air Services, Ben Griffin, from revealing further details about the government’s involvement in “extraordinary rendition”

The US administration coined the term to cover the practice of sending arrested terrorist suspects to dozens of detention facilities where torture is often carried out. Ever since reports of rendition and torture began to surface after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001, the British government has adamantly denied any knowledge or collaboration with these activities.

In his last public address before the gagging order came into force, Griffin told an antiwar rally, “I will be continuing to collect evidence and opinion on British involvement in extraordinary rendition, torture, secret detentions, extra-judicial detention, use of evidence gained through torture, breaches of the Geneva Conventions, breaches of International Law and failure to abide by our obligations as per UN Convention Against Torture. I am carrying on regardless.”

He called for former Prime Minister Tony Blair and his successor Gordon Brown to face trial for breaking international law.

Griffin served in the army for eight years, including a three-month tour in Baghdad working on secret joint operations with US Special Forces. He quit in 2005 because he believed the war was illegal and aimed at seizing control of the natural resources in the region.

He is strongly opposed to the tactics being employed by US occupation forces, including indiscriminate detention of people, a trigger-happy mentality among soldiers and routine torture of prisoners that is advocated through the chain of command. Although he had not witnessed torture first-hand, Griffin said, “I have no doubt in my mind that non-combatants I personally detained were handed over to the Americans and subsequently tortured.”

The secret joint US-UK task force within which he was posted was “responsible for the detention of hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

He added: “British soldiers are intimately involved in the actions of this task force. Jack Straw, Margaret Beckett, David Miliband, Geoff Hoon, Des Browne, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown—in their respective positions over the last five years they must know that British soldiers have been operating within this joint US/UK task force. They must have been briefed on the actions of this unit.”

The gagging order was placed under the Official Secrets Act, which has been used repeatedly since the war began to silence critics of the occupations within the civil service and armed forces on grounds of “national security.” If he makes further disclosures relating to renditions that implicate government ministers in war crimes, he could face a jail sentence.

The Foreign Office refused to comment on the allegations on the grounds that statements are never released on the activities of Special Forces soldiers.

When allegations about the government’s involvement in extraordinary rendition first surfaced in December 2005, Blair told the press, “I have absolutely no evidence to suggest that anything illegal has been happening here at all, and I am not going to start ordering inquiries into this, that and the next thing, when I have got no evidence to show whether this is right or not. And I honestly, it is like all this stuff about camps in Europe or something, I don’t know, I have never heard of such a thing, I can’t tell you whether such a thing exists.”

And again, in March 2007, Blair assured an intelligence and security committee that “he was satisfied that the US had at no time since 9/11 rendered an individual through the UK or through our Overseas Territories.”

This position became increasingly untenable as leaks from individuals within the armed forces, such as those from Griffin and former United States Army General Barry McCaffrey, as well as numerous civil servants, conflicted with official government denials.

Responding to allegations that Britain was co-operating with renditions to the UK protectorate of Diego Garcia, an Indian ocean island that is leased to the US as an air base for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, then-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said in September 2003, “The United States Government have explicitly assured us that there have never been any prisoners in detention on any US vessels moored in Diego Garcia waters. The British Government are satisfied that this is correct.”

In December 2006, McCaffrey revealed that he knew of renditions to the base. He said of suspected terrorists, “They’re behind bars, they’re dead, they’re apprehended. We’ve got them on Diego Garcia, in Bagram Airfield, in Guantanamo.”

According to a report from the civil rights group Statewatch, “Diego Garcia has been the subject of repeated, credible and concurrent claims that the island has played a major role in the US system of renditions and secret detention.”

The mounting evidence culminated in the government being forced to make limited admissions, whilst attempting to distance itself as far as possible from the US practice of renditions and torture. A carefully worded statement to parliament on February 21 by Foreign Secretary David Miliband said that Britain had recently been made aware of two US extraordinary rendition flights, which had stopped at Diego Garcia in 2002 to refuel.

Miliband said, “Contrary to earlier explicit assurances that Diego Garcia had not been used for rendition flights, recent US investigations have now revealed two occasions, both in 2002, when this had in fact occurred. An error in the earlier US records search meant that these cases did not come to light.”

He went on to spell out that the US and UK policy on counter-terrorism will continue as before: “Our counter-terrorism relationship with the United States is vital to UK security. I am absolutely clear that there must and will continue to be the strongest possible intelligence and counter-terrorism relationship with the US, consistent with UK law and our international obligations.”

It was Miliband’s evasions and denials about UK involvement in rendition that prompted Griffin to issue a statement a few days later. He pointed out that the government always talks about rendition as purely the process of flying detainees to a foreign country in the hope of deflecting attention away from the British Army’s vital role in the first stages of the process in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said the Diego Garcia admission “pales into insignificance in light of the fact that it has been British soldiers detaining the victims of extraordinary rendition in the first place.”

“Since the invasion of Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001 UKSF [United Kingdom Special Forces] has operated within a joint US/UK Task Force. This Task Force has been responsible for the detention of hundreds if not thousands of individuals in Afghanistan and Iraq. Individuals detained by British soldiers within this Task Force have ended up in Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, Bagram Theatre Internment Facility, Balad Special Forces Base, Camp Nama BIAP and Abu Ghraib Prison.”

“Whilst the government has stated its desire that the Guantanamo Bay detention camp be closed, it has remained silent over these other secretive prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan. These secretive prisons are part of a global network in which individuals face torture and are held indefinitely without charge. All of this is in direct contravention of the Geneva Conventions, International Law and the UN Convention Against Torture.”

Griffin detailed human rights abuses at Camp Nama at Baghdad International Airport in 2004, where individuals captured by the US/UK Task Force were detained and torture was carried out that was “systematic and sanctioned through the chain of command.” He also relates a story he was told by two soldiers that torture was carried out using partial asphyxiation and cattle prods.

Numerous human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, which has obtained damning firsthand evidence about abuses in secret detention facilities, have corroborated Griffin’s statements on abuse of detainees. Witnesses relate that the use of torture, including prolonged sleep deprivation, exposure to extreme temperatures, beatings and humiliating treatment were widespread and sanctioned by commanding officers. Soldiers who objected to

the treatment of prisoners were lectured on the exceptional circumstances of the “war on terror.”

The latest gagging order follows a series of similar cases where the government has forcibly silenced critics of its “war on terror” policy. Civil servant David Keogh and political researcher Leo O’Connor were jailed last year—for six months and three months, respectively—after being convicted of leaking a secret government memo from 2003, alleged to contain minutes of a meeting between then-Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush in which the latter reportedly advocated bombing Al Jazeera’s headquarters in Qatar.

The growing body of evidence exposing the crimes of detention without trial and a global network of prison camps has also implicated countries other than the UK and US. Statewatch obtained a document in 2005 that confirmed the European Union (EU) had agreed to rendition flights in CIA planes as part of a wider programme of joint security operations with the Bush administration in 2003.

In a recent report from the European Parliament on the alleged use of European countries for the illegal transport and detention of prisoners by the CIA, the EU Rapporteur Claudio Fava said, “Many governments co-operated passively or actively (with the CIA). They knew.”

According to the report, more than 1,000 CIA-operated flights used European airspace between 2001 and 2005. It also states that detention facilities may be located at US military bases in Europe and that some EU members turned a blind eye to flights operated by the CIA being used for extraordinary rendition or the illegal transportation of detainees.

The report mentions 21 well-documented cases of extraordinary rendition in which rendition victims were transferred through a European country or were residents in a European state at the time of their kidnapping. The national governments specifically criticised for their unwillingness to co-operate with investigations were those of Austria, Italy, Poland, Portugal and the UK.

Amnesty International has previously reported on more than 1,000 flights linked to the CIA, many of which used European airspace.

President George W. Bush stated in September 2006 that “alternative procedures” were necessary to deal with the new threat of global terrorism. Thanks to the courage and conviction of those like Ben Griffin, we now know more of the substance that lies behind those ominous words.

The global network of CIA “black sites” that have been established under the pretext of the “war on terror” are being used to suppress growing opposition to the imperialist aims of the United States to control the natural resources of the Middle East and Central Asia. According to the US Congress, up to 14,000 people may have been victims of rendition and secret detention since 2001.



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