

Britain: Reports state CIA “extraordinary rendition” flights landed in UK

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A US registered plane named in a 2007 European Parliament report into alleged Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) “extraordinary rendition” flights was observed to land at Birmingham Airport in England on October 2 of this year.

The 22-seat Gulfstream jet was met minutes later by two special forces helicopters belonging to Britain’s elite Special Air Service. The two army air corps Dauphin 2 helicopters are used by the SAS from their base at Credenhill, near Hereford.

The plane, registered N478GS, arrived in the UK from an undisclosed location.

The Gulfstream is registered to L-3 Integrated Systems, a Montana-based subsidiary of a US defence corporation. According to a report in the *Daily Mail*, the parent company, L-3 Communications, is a “multi-billion-dollar defence corporation based in New York, whose clients include several American government departments, among them the Department of Homeland Security.”

Records indicate that the aircraft made many flights between Ireland and Egypt in 2003. It was also involved in an accident at Bucharest airport in Romania in 2004, following a flight from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan.

In its 2007 report on “the alleged use of European countries by the CIA for the transportation and illegal detention of prisoners,” the European Parliament stated that seven passengers had disappeared after the accident at Bucharest airport. The report condemned the CIA’s use of Romania as a location for extraordinary renditions of “terror suspects,” including British nationals such as Binyam Mohammed.

In the document’s section on Romania, the European Parliament said it regretted “the lack of control of the Gulfstream aircraft with Registration Number N478GS that suffered an accident on 6 December 2004 when landing in Bucharest; recalls that the aircraft took off from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, and that its seven

passengers disappeared following the accident.”

The report, “Expresses serious concern about the 21 stopovers made by CIA-operated aircraft at Romanian airports that on many occasions came from or were bound for countries linked with extraordinary rendition circuits and the transfer of detainees; deplores the stopovers in Romania of aircraft which have been shown to have been used by the CIA, on other occasions, for the extraordinary renditions of Ahmed Agiza, Mohammed El- Zari, Bisher Al-Rawi, Jamil El-Banna, Abou Elkassim Britel, Khaled El-Masri, Binyam Mohammed and Abu Omar; is particularly concerned that, of the flights referred to, two originated from or were destined for Guantánamo; strongly encourages the Romanian authorities to investigate these flights further.”

Gulfstream N478GS was seen landing by an employee at Birmingham Airport. Speaking to the *Daily Mail* anonymously, the employee said that he recognised the helicopters as those belonging to 8 Flight Army Air Corps and used by the SAS.

As well as observing the Gulfstream jet, the *Mail* added that the witness “saw another plane, a Boeing 757 operated by COMCO, land at the airport on October 1, and that this was also met by two SAS helicopters. He said: ‘People were seen transferring between all the aircraft.’”

The COMCO aircraft in question was registered N226G. COMCO is a private firm that operates flights for the US defence department. According to its Wikipedia entry, “COMCO is the de facto name of an American airline operating two Boeing 757 aircraft, registrations being N226G and N610G. Both aircraft are painted completely white with the word ‘Comco’ appearing on the tail. Little is known about the exact nature of their operation, but they are believed to operate on behalf of the United States Department of Defense.”

The landings were also photographed by the

Birmingham Aviation Enthusiasts Group, who posted the images of the Gulfstream jet, the SAS helicopters and the COMCO N226G on its Web site with approximate times of arrival.

A British Ministry of Defence employee refused to give any details on what the aircraft were doing in Birmingham. “This was routine military liaison between two allies,” he said, and did not involve extraordinary rendition flights.

The Brown government denies that the presence of the aircraft had anything to do with the illegal kidnap and transfer of detainees to countries for torture, but it has refused to divulge any information about what they were both doing in Birmingham airport at the same time. The *Daily Mail* report comments on the fact that the “planes were parked in an area mostly used by private aircraft and situated away from the main runways.”

A further statement in the *Mail* from an “aviation expert” points to the fact that both planes were engaged in a highly secretive mission.

The *Daily Mail* reports that the expert “had tried to use the online tracking service www.flightaware.co.uk to monitor the flight plans of both planes to find out where they had flown from before landing in Birmingham on October 1, and where they flew to when they left on October 3.” He told the newspaper that he was “very surprised” to be unable to trace any of the flights and that this level of secrecy was highly unusual.

What is known is that the same Gulfstream jet is still very active. A report in the *Guardian* stated that the “Gulfstream has also been photographed at Glasgow Prestwick Airport, Shannon Airport in Ireland and Stuttgart Airport in Germany.”

The Brown government’s denials of British involvement in extraordinary rendition cannot be accepted. It was only in March 2006 that the government was finally forced into admitting that aircraft believed to have been used by the CIA to transport prisoners to secret detention centres did land at British military airfields.

Former Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram said in a letter to then Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell that a Boeing 737 and a Gulfstream landed 14 times at RAF (Royal Air Force) Northolt and RAF Brize Norton between October 2003 and May 2004. Both aircraft were believed to be CIA controlled. The Boeing 737, registered N313P, had made flights to Tripoli in Libya, Luqa in Malta, and Shannon, Ireland. The Gulfstream—registered first as N379P and later as N8068V—made stops en route to Amman in Jordan,

Marrakech in Morocco, and Doha in Qatar.

At the time, then foreign secretary Jack Straw had repeated the standard government line that he was “unaware” of any CIA flights since 1998 using UK airspace and transporting detainees. But in February 2006, the UK National Air Traffic Services (NATS) confirmed that aircraft with CIA tail numbers had made fairly regular flights through British airspace. As the result of a parliamentary question tabled by the Liberal Democrats, NATS disclosed that “around 200 journeys” through British airspace had been made over the past five years.

The *Mail* and *Guardian* stories appeared as the Brown government continued its attempt to suppress evidence of British complicity in the abuse of those detained under the “war on terror” and subject to extraordinary rendition.

In October, the High Court ordered the release of details of a CIA briefing to British officials concerning the detention and treatment of Binyam Mohamed. He was arrested in Pakistan in 2002 as he attempted to board a flight to Britain. Accused by the US of involvement in terrorism, he was flown by the CIA to Morocco, where he states he was tortured with razor blades. He was subsequently moved on to Afghanistan and then Guantánamo Bay, where he was held for a further four years. He was eventually released without charge in February.

Binyam is currently suing the British government on the grounds that its intelligence services were complicit in the abuse, stating that he was visited by an MI5 officer during his detention in Morocco. The CIA briefing is reported to verify that MI5 was aware of his captivity.

The Brown government appealed the High Court ruling, claiming that the disclosure of CIA sourced intelligence material would damage UK-US relations.



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