

Cables show Portugal's role in secret CIA prisoner flights

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The Portuguese government allowed the CIA to use Lajes Air Base in the Azores for flights to repatriate prisoners held at the US detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, but kept the arrangement secret because of public opposition to its previous collaboration with CIA rendition flights, according to US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks.

The series of cables sent by the US ambassador in Lisbon in 2006 and 2007 gives a glimpse into how Washington manages its relations with a client state whose government is completely subservient to US foreign policy, but whose population is hostile, particularly to the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The first cable, in September 2006, is concerned with the aftermath of the scandal over CIA rendition flights, moving prisoners to secret “black site” prisons or to Guantanamo Bay, where they were interrogated and tortured. These flights made use of Lajes, a key transit point for the US military and intelligence operations in the region. More than 3,000 flights related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan pass through Lajes each year.

The Portuguese government publicly maintained that it was unaware of the CIA rendition flights and had not given them a private green light. The cable from Ambassador Alfred Hoffman notes approvingly that Foreign Minister Luis Amado was continuing this cover-up: “During recent closed testimony before the Portuguese Parliament, he did not diverge from his predecessor's position that the Portuguese government was not aware of any CIA flights on/through Portugal.”

The cable reports that the Portuguese minister enthusiastically supported giving the CIA permission to use Lajes to repatriate prisoners from Guantanamo: “Amado said that the return of Guantanamo detainees would be an excellent opportunity for the USG to ‘turn the page’ and to begin working on a new human rights image.”

Despite this reference to burnishing the image of the Bush administration, badly discredited by the revelations of secret CIA torture prisons, Amado still insisted that the return flights had to be kept secret from the Portuguese people and from the European Parliament, which was then in an uproar over the exposure of the rendition flights. The secrecy was required at least in part because the repatriations frequently involved transferring Guantanamo detainees to even worse prisons in their home countries, where they would be subject to abuse and torture.

The cable continues, recording the hostility of the Portuguese social democrat to the working people his party purports to represent: “In addition to European Parliament agitation on this issue, Amado expressed a need to control his own Socialist Party. He said there was not a broad consensus within the party to pursue a strong transatlantic foreign policy and that there was concern that the ‘left wing’ within the party could break away in response to the government's handling of human rights and security issues.”

The cable concludes that Amado “is very pro-American and extremely accessible,” and that he backed US foreign policy both in the Middle East, particularly emphasizing the supposed danger of Iran, and in Latin America, where he was trying to delay an official visit by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to Portugal, but “could not hold him off forever.”

The next cable, written a month later, followed a public scene in the Portuguese parliament where Amado angrily threatened to resign over accusations that he had covered up secret CIA rendition flights through Lajes. The cable notes: “the saga continues due to continued opposition party and European Parliament pressure. This pressure complicates the US request to repatriate Guantanamo detainees via Portugal.”

Amado's actual statement to parliament, that there was no evidence that laws had been broken “on Portuguese

soil,” had an obvious and glaring loophole. It merely meant that the CIA torture had taken place in some other country.

As the cable explains: “Amado admitted that the alleged CIA flights might have come through Portugal, but added that Portugal ‘has nothing to be ashamed of.’ According to the Minister, there is no evidence that the CIA committed illegal acts in Portuguese territory ...”

The cable goes on to alert its Washington readers that the government of Portugal needed reassurances during an upcoming meeting between Amado and Condoleezza Rice that the CIA repatriation flights were “on solid legal ground.”

Portuguese law, the cable continued, “requires written assurance by the final destination country that detainees will not be tortured or receive the death penalty as well as a US guarantee that they will be treated according to internationally-recognized conventions in the destination country. Without these assurances, the GOP [government of Portugal] will have difficulty in supporting repatriation flights through Portuguese territory or airspace.”

It is doubtful that the “final destination countries” gave such assurances in writing, and if they did, the declarations were worthless. The Azores base would likely have been used for trans-Atlantic flights to such countries as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, all of which routinely torture prisoners, particularly those suspected of affiliation with Islamist political currents.

Another cable followed directed to Rice, briefing her on the upcoming meeting with Amado. It deserves extensive quotation because of its unvarnished political cynicism.

Foreign Minister Amado, it reads, “is pro-US, committed to a strong NATO and Transatlantic relationship and seeks to coordinate policy with the US. He places great importance on presenting a united public front, whether it be within the EU, NATO or with the US. If there are differences, he prefers to discuss them discreetly behind closed doors. Minister Amado last visited the U.S. in his official capacity of Minister of Defense in November 2005 when he had a personal meeting with Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. He is still smarting from being stood up by the NSC-Crouch during last year's visit. *It would be to our benefit to stroke him a lot*” (emphasis added).

The cable continues: “It would be of great assistance if you could personally express appreciation for Amado’s steadfastness in supporting the US position on this issue and his continued contribution of troops to global operations.”

The next cable was sent the following summer, in July 2007, as a scene-setter for Rice’s upcoming trip to Europe, which included a reciprocal visit to Portugal. In the course of reviewing the Lisbon regime’s general alignment with US foreign policy, including small deployments of military units in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the cable notes the conclusion of the discussions over secret CIA flights.

“Amado agreed to allow the repatriation of prisoners through Lajes Air Base on a case-by-case basis under limited circumstances. This was a difficult decision, given the sustained criticism by Portuguese media and leftist elements of his own party of the government’s handling of the CIA rendition flights controversy. *Amado’s agreement has never been made public*” (emphasis added).

The Portuguese people were thus kept in the dark about their own government’s collaboration in the US “war on terror.”

There is no mention in this cable of Amado’s request for assurances that the prisoners transported would not be tortured when they arrived back in their home countries, nor of the fate of any of these prisoners.

The cable concludes with the following appreciation of Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates: “He is a very moderate Socialist who has been successful at co-opting or marginalizing the leftists in his party. He also aggressively pursued his domestic agenda before assuming the EU presidency, achieving difficult labor and social security reforms and reducing Portugal’s budget deficit to near EU-mandated levels.”

There is little to add to this characterization, except to say that, in the current European-wide financial crisis, Socrates has fully vindicated this assessment of his right-wing political orientation. He has rammed through repeated austerity measures, cutting jobs, wages and public services, and doing the bidding of the big European and American banks.



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