

UK government attempts to conceal its involvement in rendition and torture

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9 August 2014

The British government is seeking to cover up its role in the illegal “extraordinary rendition”—kidnappings and torture—programme run by the United States.

Ahead of the delayed release of a US Senate report on the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) torture system, in place under the previous George W. Bush administration, the *Observer* revealed that the UK government has approached its US counterparts to censor information regarding Britain’s involvement in rendition and torture through the use of the Indian Ocean air base of Diego Garcia.

Diego Garcia, a tiny atoll, is a British Overseas Territory that has been leased to the US for decades. It became a strategic base for the US military during the Cold War and was used to supply its forces in the Red Sea and Vietnam. It was also the only base used for air strikes against Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991. It was used again by the US military for the “shock and awe” bombardment of Iraq in 2003 as well as the heavy bombardment of Afghanistan in 2001.

The *Observer* cites a letter from former UK Foreign Secretary William Hague to the human rights organisation Reprieve. Hague was Foreign Secretary for four years in the government of Prime Minister David Cameron until last month’s cabinet reshuffle.

Hague informed Reprieve that, “We have made representations to seek assurances that ordinary procedures for clearance of UK material will be followed in the event that UK material provide[d] to the Senate committee were to be disclosed.”

The meaning is clear: the UK government is insistent that details of its active participation in an illegal global kidnapping and torture network, in close collaboration with the US, remain under lock and key.

The censoring being demanded by the British is just part of an overall mass of redactions being put in place

by the US military-intelligence apparatus prior to the report’s release. Last Friday, Senator Dianne Feinstein said the Senate Intelligence Committee would delay the release of the declassified summary of its voluminous report on the CIA torture system, due to the scale of redactions being made.

Successive UK governments have denied accusations that Diego Garcia was used as a “black site” prison and that rendition flights landed there. As far back as 2002, the *Washington Post* reported that Diego Garcia was “one of a number of secret detention centers overseas.”

In 2008 then British Foreign Secretary David Miliband told parliament that two US flights each containing a prisoner did refuel on the island in 2002, but claimed those detained remained on board and that the “US Government has assured us that no US detainees have ever been held on Diego Garcia.”

Andrew Tyrie, a Conservative MP, is the founder and chairman of Parliaments all-party group on rendition. When he requested that the Foreign Office pass him the Diego Garcia flight records, he was told there were none available. Writing this week he said, “Last month, when I asked again, I was told these records had, in fact, been kept but flight records from 2002 were ‘incomplete due to water damage’.” He revealed, “Just a week later... the Foreign Office announced that ‘previously wet paper records have been dried out’ and ‘no flight records have been lost as a result of the water damage’.”

Tyrie has called for an inquiry in Britain’s involvement in rendition and torture on the basis that without this happening, the UK’s ability to portray itself as an upholder of democracy on the international stage is vastly undermined. “With the truth established, Britain can draw a line under these allegations and demonstrate that we abide by the values that we expect

of others.”

The lies that Diego Garcia has played no role in rendition and torture continue to unravel. An account by freelance investigative journalist Andy Worthington, published on *Al-Jazeera* last month noted, “In October 2003, *Time* reported that ‘a regional intelligence official’ had stated that Hambali, a ‘high-value detainee’ seized in Thailand two months earlier, was being held and interrogated on Diego Garcia, and in the years that followed, other claims were made, both by journalists and by retired US general Barry McCaffrey, who, in May 2004 and December 2006, referred to prisoners being held on Diego Garcia.”

Worthington continued, “[I]n July 2009 Reprieve, the legal action charity, identified one man rendered through Diego Garcia as former Guantanamo prisoner, Mohammed Saad Iqbal Madni. Since then, there have been other claims, further undermining US and UK credibility—claims that, for example, Abdul Hakim Belhadj and Sami al-Saadi, two opponents of Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi, who were kidnapped with their families, and with UK assistance, had passed through Diego Garcia.”

Britain’s collusion in the systematic torture of individuals who have been illegally seized by US authorities is now established as fact.

In 2010, the British Court of Appeal agreed to release an earlier ruling, in the face of fierce opposition from the then Labour government, that the UK intelligence body MI5 had colluded with US authorities and played a leading role in the torture of British resident Binyam Mohamed

The CIA has facilities all over the world, including in Europe for torturing those it has illegally seized. One of the CIA’s main locations is Poland.

Such is the mountain of evidence that has emerged about Poland’s role that the European Court of Human Rights ruled last month that Abu Zubaydah and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, two prisoners currently being held in Guantánamo Bay by the United States, were transferred from Thailand to Poland by the CIA, where they were tortured.

The ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is the first time any court has ruled on the existence and activities of the CIA’s secret prison and torture network in Europe.

The ECHR said it was “beyond reasonable doubt”

that Zubaydah was flown to a site in Stare Kiejkuty in northern Poland. It found that that Poland was “informed of and involved in the preparation and execution of the [High Value Detainee] Programme on its territory,” but also “for all practical purposes, facilitated the whole process, created the conditions for it to happen and made no attempt to prevent it.”

The war crimes carried out by British troops during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in which the UK was the main partner of the US, continue to come to light. Last week Reprieve cited the case of Yunus Rahmatullah, a Pakistani citizen who was captured by British forces in Iraq in February 2004 and subsequent rendered to Afghanistan later that year. He was held at the US-run prison at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan for ten years without charge, trial, or access to a lawyer.

He was initially seized despite having no involvement with any of the fighting in Iraq and was only in the country in order to find work on real estate projects after the initial US invasion, resulting in the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, had ended. According to Reprieve, UK troops raided a house where he was staying with friends, “blindfolded Yunus, punched and kicked him, and hit him with the butt of their rifles. He was thrown in the back of a military vehicle and driven to a camp. On the way, the vehicle stopped and Yunus was taken out. UK forces again violently assaulted him.”

Reprieve adds, “He was detained in Iraq at the now-notorious Camp Nama, where UK forces were also present, and possibly also in Abu Ghraib prison.” The US-run Abu Ghraib was the site of horrifying and systematic torture, abuse and murder of prisoners by US military personnel in Iraq.



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