

US official admits to UK role in rendition to Diego Garcia

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A senior official from the Bush administration has admitted that the then Labour British government was complicit in the CIA's extraordinary rendition, interrogation and torture. Britain colluded in the use of the British overseas territory of Diego Garcia by the US for its criminal activities.

The admission flatly contradicts the lies and evasions of the British government. Over a period of years, the Labour government—whose first Foreign Secretary Robin Cook famously boasted that Britain would pursue an “ethical foreign policy”—including former Prime Minister Tony Blair and former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, denied any involvement on no less than 54 occasions.

The lies started to unravel in 2008, when then Labour Foreign Secretary David Miliband said that information had “just come to light” that Diego Garcia had been used as a refuelling stop for extraordinary rendition flights on just two occasions in 2002. He still denied that any detainees had ever set foot on the island, which is leased to the US.

Since then, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron has continued the lies, claiming that Britain was not involved in the rendition program. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition has issued statements that fell apart within days, refused to provide any meaningful answers to Freedom of Information requests from human rights organisations or the media, and resisted any public inquiry into the UK's role in the horrific crimes of US imperialism.

Shortly after taking office in 2010, Cameron promised an independent inquiry into the issue. But in 2013 he reneged on that pledge in favour of a toothless inquiry by the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee that can be relied on to whitewash the government's role when it eventually publishes its

report.

The claims by Lawrence Wilkerson, former US Secretary of State Colin Powell's chief of staff between 2002 and 2005, add to the growing pressure on the British government to come clean on its involvement in the CIA's rendition programme, global network of secret prisons and criminality. This includes kidnapping, illegal detention for years under the most inhumane conditions, torture, water boarding, sexual assault, sleep deprivation, forcing inmates to stand on broken limbs, and murder, for which no officials have stood trial.

Wilkerson's claims—along with other evidence—could pave the way for a flood of litigation against the government. Last July, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Poland had actively assisted the CIA's European “black sites” program.

Wilkerson's information came from four well-placed CIA and intelligence sources, including a veteran of the renditions programme and an official who was “very much plugged in to what was going on at the CIA.” After he retired, he said Diego Garcia was known as a place to get things done “out of the limelight.”

While there was no permanent detention facility there, it was used as a transit location when other places were full, insecure or unavailable. “So you might have a case where you simply go in and use a facility at Diego Garcia for a month, or two weeks, or whatever, and you do your *nefarious activities* there.” [emphasis added]

He added that the British authorities must have been aware of what was going on, saying, “It's difficult for me to think that we could do anything there of any duration to speak of without the British knowing—at least the British on the island—knowing what we were doing.” Furthermore, “A general theme I heard was

that the British were very cooperative with everything.”

This is very similar to statements by Michael Blyth, a British Royal Marine, who was head of security on Diego Garcia in 2001-2002. He said in testimony to the High Court that while a permanent site was ruled out, the possibility of using the island “for the purpose of prisoner transfers and/or detention was raised occasionally ... by US officials.”

The UN former special envoy on torture, Manfred Nowak, stated in 2008 that he had been told detainees were held on Diego Garcia in 2002 and 2003. Barry McCaffrey, a retired four-star US general, also said that detainees were held on Diego Garcia, but later retracted his claim.

Swiss senator Dick Marty, who led a Council of Europe investigation into the CIA’s use of European territory and air space, said that the island had been used and that some CIA officers had helped him during his investigation.

Time magazine cited a regional intelligence officer saying that a suspected Al Qaeda terrorist known as Hambali, believed to have been involved in the 2002 Bali bombing in which 202 people died, was taken to Diego Garcia and interrogated following his capture in August 2003.

Abdel Hakim Belhaj is a Libyan dissident opposed to former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who is suing the British government and three officials for “extraordinary rendition” via Diego Garcia, where his aircraft refuelled, to Libya in 2004. His lawyers have cited documents found in abandoned government offices in Tripoli after the 2011 NATO-led invasion of Libya to topple the Gaddafi regime and install a puppet government.

A letter from the senior MI6 officer, Sir Mark Allen, to Libya’s intelligence chief Musa Kusa, shows that thanks to help from British intelligence, the CIA planned to use Diego Garcia as a stopover for rendering him and his pregnant wife to be tortured in Libya. Belhaj claims that during his more than four years in a Libyan prison he was interrogated by US and British intelligence agents.

While it has been known for decades that Diego Garcia has some kind of US detention facility, the British government turned down an informal request from the US in 2001 to use it for a Guantanamo-type facility to hold hundreds of suspected “terrorist”

prisoners from Afghanistan. The official UK government position is that it never gave the US explicit permission to use the island for its rendition, detention and torture program.

Successive British governments have sought to cover up what was going on.

To cite but one of the most damaging examples: Last July, when asked in parliament about the records of flights to and from the island, Conservative Foreign Office Minister Mark Simmonds claimed the records were “incomplete due to water damage” in June 2014. A week later, he said the “previously wet paper records have been dried out... no flight records have been lost as a result of the water damage.”

But in September, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee was told that the papers had been “damaged [by water] to the point of no longer being useful.”

Ministers refused to answer questions raised in parliament over whether the US had sought permission to use Diego Garcia for Belhaj and his wife’s rendition to Libya.

Last August, David Miliband implied that further evidence could well emerge—and as a former Labour Foreign Secretary, he is in a position to know.

In December, it was revealed that Britain had made repeated requests that its role be struck out from the US Senate Intelligence Committee’s executive summary of its report into torture by the CIA, itself only a summary of a 6,700-page classified report. In the event, the CIA and the Obama administration insisted that all references to the participation of other governments were omitted.



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