

More evidence of European collaboration with CIA torture flights and prisons

By Robert Stevens
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The efforts of the European powers to deny knowledge of CIA flights through Europe transferring prisoners to be tortured overseas—and even the existence of CIA torture facilities in Europe—have suffered further damning exposures.

On December 12, Britain's foreign secretary, Jack Straw, admitted that in 1998 the UK government had approved two requests made by the administration of then-president Bill Clinton to “render a detainee through UK territory or airspace.”

Straw, who was home secretary in 1998, said that one request was turned down because the individual concerned was to be transported to Egypt. He did not explain on what grounds this refusal to transport somebody to Egypt had been made.

On January 10, Straw said in a written statement to the Houses of Parliament that a search of Foreign Office records revealed that in 1998 the UK refused an American request to refuel a flight carrying detainees. Straw said that those officials had now completed a search of all relevant records dating back to when the Labour government took office in May 1997.

The fact that such requests were made by the US at all contradicts the claims made by Prime Minister Tony Blair that the US would not have made such requests, so that he would have no reason to have knowledge of the purpose of CIA flights through Britain.

Straw now claims that no rendition requests had been found since September 11, 2001. Following his answer, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee is to reopen an inquiry into Britain's role in rendition flights.

A memo obtained by the *New Statesman* provides new evidence showing that the government in fact did know of US rendition flights and that it had been advised by the Foreign Office that extraordinary rendition was illegal.

The memo is dated December 7—more than two weeks prior to that of Blair's press conference. It also makes clear why Straw has now made his belated and partial admission. It states, “We cannot say that we have received no such

request for the use of UK territory.

“The papers we have uncovered so far suggest that there could be more than the two cases referred to in the House by the Foreign Secretary.

“It does remain true that we are not aware of the use of UK territory or airspace for the purposes of extraordinary rendition.”

An *Independent* article on January 19 reads: “The memo, from Irfan Siddiq to Grace Cassy at 10 Downing St., suggests the Prime Minister ‘should try to avoid getting drawn on detail’ and ‘try to move the debate on.’ On 22 December, Mr. Blair said at his monthly press conference: ‘It is not something that I have ever actually come across until this whole thing has blown up, and I don't know anything about it.’ ”

The memo addresses a number of issues, including those pertaining to the legality of extraordinary renditions.

The article continues: “One of the questions the document addressed was: ‘How do we know whether those our armed forces have helped to capture in Iraq or Afghanistan have subsequently been sent to interrogation centres?’ The answer: ‘We have no mechanism for establishing this, though we would not ourselves question such detainees while they were in such facilities.’

“The key thing the Foreign Office did accept was that extraordinary rendition ‘is almost certainly illegal,’ and any British co-operation ‘would also be illegal.’ ”

On December 7, the date that the leaked document was circulated within the government, Charles Kennedy, the then-Liberal Democrat leader, had asked Blair in Parliament when he had first been made aware of the American rendition flights, and when he approved them. Blair replied, “In respect of airports, I do not know what the right honourable gentleman is referring to.”

The memo also advised the government to rely on and defend a statement by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who said last month that America did not transport anyone to a country where it believed they would be tortured and that, “where appropriate,” Washington would seek

assurances.

The memo says in this respect, “We would not want to cast doubt on the principle of such government-to-government assurances, not least given our own attempts to secure these from countries to which we wish to deport their nationals suspected of involvement in terrorism: Algeria, etc.”

As evidence is mounting against the Blair government, so too with other European states.

Swiss Senator Dick Marty, who is leading an investigation into renditions for the Council of Europe, spoke to the Swiss media on January 14 about the results of his inquiry thus far.

“The question is: was the CIA really working in Europe?” he said. “I believe we can say today, without a doubt, yes.”

As well as condemning the US for breaching the Geneva Conventions, the senator stated that European governments were complicit and had indeed embraced the concept of “extraordinary rendition.”

Marty condemned European governments who supported renditions and even helped carry them out, while claiming to know nothing. “It’s not possible to transport people from one place to another in such a manner without the secret services knowing about it,” he said. Ergo, European governments had been “willingly silent.”

“What was shocking was the passivity with which we all, in Europe, have welcomed these things. Europeans should be less hypocritical and not turn a blind eye. There are those who do the dirty work abroad but there are also those who know when they should close their eyes when that dirty work is being done.”

Marty also said that it was unfair to single out Romania and Poland for having collaborated with the CIA in torturing prisoners. He is due to give a preliminary report to the Council of Europe on January 23, but said that he did not have concrete proof and expected his inquiry to last another 12 months.

His apparent candour is made necessary because of the leak of a classified document drawn up by the Swiss Intelligence Service. According to sources, the document appears to confirm the existence of secret CIA interrogation centres in several eastern European countries, including Romania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Kosovo.

Switzerland’s intelligence service intercepted a fax being sent by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry in Cairo to its embassy in London. This fax was then written up into a classified document and sent to senior Swiss intelligence officers. According to some sources, it was also passed to government ministers. If the Swiss government knew and remained silent, then Marty has little choice but to implicate others while stalling for time. At the same time, investigations have been launched into the source of the leak

to *SonntagsBlick* newspaper and the two journalists who published the document’s details.

Evidence that Britain sanctions the use of torture has also been presented by Craig Murray, Britain’s former ambassador to Uzbekistan.

Murray’s memoirs—which document his own opposition to Britain’s collaboration with Uzbek security services—are being blocked by the Foreign Office.

On December 29, he defied the attempt to gag him by publishing documents on his web site. The first is made up of several letters he sent back to London between 2002 and 2004, warning that information being passed on by Uzbekistan had been obtained through torture. The second allegedly contains the legal opinion from Sir Michael Wood, a legal adviser to the Foreign Office, arguing that the use of information extracted through torture does not violate the UN Convention Against Torture.

In a statement, Murray says: “In March 2003 I was summoned back to London from Tashkent specifically for a meeting at which I was told to stop protesting. I was told specifically that it was perfectly legal for us to obtain and to use intelligence from the Uzbek torture chambers.

“After this meeting Sir Michael Wood, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s legal adviser, wrote to confirm this position.

“This minute from Michael Wood is perhaps the most important document that has become public about extraordinary rendition. It is irrefutable evidence of the Government’s use of torture material, and that I was attempting to stop it. It is no wonder that the government is trying to suppress this.”

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