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Libyan rendition case shows it's time for UK to come clean

The UK must ensure full accountability for its role in rendition, torture and unlawful detention, Amnesty International said as a Libyan man subjected to rendition in 2004 allegedly with MI6 involvement launched a civil claim for damages against UK ex-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw for torture and misfeasance in public office.

This is the latest step in the legal actions brought by Abdel Hakim Belhaj, and his wife Fatima Bouchar, plus another Libyan man Sami al-Saadi and his family, against UK authorities for the alleged role played in their renditions to Libya.

It is the first such civil claim to specifically name an individual former government minister.

The Metropolitan Police have been investigating the allegations since January 2012.

"The allegations and concrete evidence of UK involvement in renditions to Libya have long been mounting," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

"This latest announcement of legal action by a rendition victim could be an important step towards accountability through the civil courts, and is an ongoing reminder of the failure by UK authorities to establish a human rights compliant inquiry into these and wider allegations of UK involvement in torture and other human rights violations, in Libya and elsewhere."

The legal action has also been taken at a time when the UK government is planning new legislation targeting cases which the government considers to concern 'national security'. These legislative proposals would allow the authorities to present secret evidence behind closed doors in the absence of the claimant and their lawyer of choice.

The government has proposed that civil claims against the security services and government departments should be heard this way.

"This legal action is also in the shadow of government proposals to ensure civil lawsuits against the government and intelligence agencies which raise issues of 'national security' take place largely behind closed doors. If those proposals are successful, victims of rendition and torture would find it even harder than they already do to seek accountability," said Dalhuisen.

"Today's legal action is a stark reminder of the importance of ensuring that cases such as these, where the UK is alleged to have been involved in serious human rights violations, should not be draped in a cloak of secrecy but subject to an open, transparent and fair process."

Following his rendition from Thailand, Abdel Hakim Belhaj was detained in the notorious Abu Salim Prison in Tripoli until his release in March 2010. His current position is Head of the Tripoli Military Council. Delegates from Amnesty International met with Abdel Hakim Belhaj in September 2011, and

also visited Abu Salim prison in May 2009 when Abdel Hakim Belhaj was held there.