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USA: Front companies used in secret flights to torture and "disappearance"

Amnesty International today released a new report which exposes a covert operation whereby people have been arrested or abducted, transferred and held in secret or handed over to countries where they have faced torture and other ill-treatment. The report describes how the CIA has used private aircraft operators and front companies to preserve the secrecy of "rendition" flights.

Below the radar: Secret flights to torture and 'disappearance', shows that the CIA has exploited aviation practices that would otherwise require their flights to be declared to aviation authorities. The report lists dozens of destinations around the world where planes associated with "rendition" flights have landed and taken off -- and lists private airlines with permission to land at US military bases worldwide.

Amnesty International has records of nearly 1,000 flights directly linked to the CIA, most of which have used European airspace; these are flights by planes that appear to have been permanently operated by the CIA through front companies. In a second category, there are records of some 600 other flights made by planes confirmed as having been used at least temporarily by the CIA.

The report details the destinations and ownership of specific aircraft linked to people interviewed by Amnesty International who have been transferred illegally. For example one particular aircraft is known to have made over 100 stops in Guantanamo Bay. Another took Abu Omar to Egypt from Germany after he was kidnapped in Italy. Its owners have admitted leasing the plane to the CIA, but have said it is not used exclusively by the agency. There are 488 relevant recorded landings or take-offs between February 2001 and July 2005.

"The US Administration has tried to circumvent the ban on torture and other ill-treatment in many ways. The latest evidence shows how the Administration is manipulating commercial arrangements in order to be able to transfer people in violation of international law. It demonstrates the length to which the US government will go to conceal these abductions," said Amnesty International Secretary General, Irene Khan.

The report uncovers part of the mystery surrounding the practice of renditions. Secrecy surrounding rendition operations means it is impossible to know how many people have been arrested or abducted, transferred across borders, held in secret detention or tortured in the 'war on terror'. Information from governments themselves indicates that numbers are likely to be in the hundreds.

The report analyses new information about "black site" detention provided to Amnesty International by three Yemeni men recently released after a two-year rendition ordeal, which raises the possibility that they were held somewhere in eastern Europe or Central Asia.

Muhammad Al-Assad, Muhammad Bashmilah and Salah 'Ali Qaru spent 13 months in one secret facility before being flown to Yemen in May 2005 and eventually released last month.

"Their captors went to great lengths to conceal their location to the men, but circumstantial evidence such as climate, prayer schedules and flight times to and from the site suggest that they may have been held in eastern Europe or Central Asia," said senior advisor Anne FitzGerald. "But without further information from the US government and European authorities, it is impossible to verify exactly where."

Rendition is the illegal transfer of people from one country to another in ways that bypass all judicial and administrative oversight. The aim of rendition in the "war on terror" is usually to facilitate interrogation of suspects outside the reach of the law.

"Renditions are not just about transporting terror suspects from one place to another without red tape. The term sanitises the multiple layers of human rights violations involved," said Ms Khan.

"Most victims of rendition were arrested and detained illegally in the first place. Many were abducted, denied access to any legal process and have subsequently "disappeared". All of those interviewed by Amnesty International described being tortured or otherwise ill-treated."

"The callous and calculated multiplicity of abuses is shocking. People captured have been subjected to a range of abuses of human rights by a number of governments acting in collusion, and all of this has been shrouded by secrecy and deceit," said Ms Khan.

"The report shows not just how arrest and extradition procedures have been ignored, the ban on torture and other ill-treatment has been disregarded, but also how aviation practices have been undermined: in essence the rule of law has been put aside."

Amnesty International cautioned that states that tolerate these flights landing on their territory and companies that carry them out, may find themselves complicit in serious human rights abuses.

The organization called for the transfer of any detainee to other countries to take place with proper safeguards, including judicial oversight, and the use of official aircraft.

"All governments must prevent, investigate and prosecute those responsible for secret detention and rendition," declared Ms Khan.

Amnesty International called on the aviation sector to take specific and immediate action to ensure that aviation companies do not lease their aircraft in circumstances in which they may be used in renditions. The onus is on companies to ensure that they are aware of the end use of any aircraft they lease or operate and that they do not facilitate human rights violations.

Amnesty International called on governments to:

- Insist that any plane or helicopter used to carry out the missions of the intelligence services be declared a 'state' flight, regardless of whether they are carried out using civilian aircraft.

- Prohibit the use of airspace and airports for renditions and actively investigate suspected rendition cases.

- Disclose the full extent of these practices and the fate of those whose whereabouts are still unknown.

Notes to editors

Estimated numbers of rendition victims:

The Egyptian prime minister noted in 2005 that the US has transferred some 60-70 detainees to Egypt alone,

and a former CIA agent with experience in the region believes that "hundreds" of detainees may have been sent by the US to prisons in Middle Eastern countries. The USA has acknowledged the capture of about 30 "high value" detainees whose whereabouts remain unknown, and the CIA is reportedly investigating some three dozen additional cases of "erroneous rendition", in which people were detained based on flawed evidence or confusion over names. See also: USA: Human dignity denied: Torture and accountability in the "war on terror" (AI Index: AMR 51/145/2004) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR511452004>.

Full text of the report will be available from 5 April at:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR510512006>

To obtain an embargoed copy of the report, contact Amnesty International Press Office (see details below).

Amnesty International is campaigning to stop torture and other ill-treatment in the "war on terror". For more information, please go to the campaign home page: <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/stoptorture-index-eng>
www.amnesty.org/stoptorture

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