

EU states knew and helped rendition CIA flights in Europe

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European Union lawmakers approved a report which slams EU countries for tolerating or assisting the United States' practice of secret detentions of terrorist suspects.

At least 10 European states, including Britain, Poland, Italy and Germany aided or knew about the CIA's clandestine programme of taking terrorism suspects to other countries for interrogation, the report says.

It ends a year-long investigation by a special European Parliament committee.

The text, adopted by 28 votes in favour, 17 against and 3 abstentions, criticises EU states for a failure to fulfil "the European obligations, such as the respect of human rights."

More than 1,245 CIA-operated flights flew over European airspace or stopped over at airports in Europe, Euro MPs concluded, urging member states to investigate these so-called rendition flights.

EU deputies "condemned the fact that European countries have been relinquishing their control over their airspace and airports by turning a blind eye or admitting flights operated by the CIA which, on some occasions, were being used for extraordinary renditions."

Italian Socialist MEP Claudio Fava, who drafted the final conclusions of the probe, told reporters that "involvement in detainment amounts to a certain extent to involvement in torture."

The report, which goes to a vote of the full parliament next month, says that claims that the CIA had a secret prison in Poland are unproven. However, Euro MPs stressed that Poland was the EU country least cooperative with the parliament probe.

The report also accuses the EU's foreign policy and security chief Javier Solana, saying that he did not reveal his knowledge about the detention programme.

In addition, Euro MPs called on the bloc to more strictly monitor data transfer to non-EU countries and the use of European airspace. They also demanded more EU competencies in the area of combatting international terrorism.

Human Rights Watch in New York responded to the report by saying European countries need to go further to stop their own policies that allow torture to continue worldwide.

In a briefing paper, the non-profit group said EU states used "diplomatic assurances" to

justify returning terrorism suspects to places where they were likely to be tortured.

The group said such policies are unreliable, unenforceable and ineffective and do little to protect against torture.

“European governments have used these empty promises as a fig leaf to justify sending people to places where they risk being tortured,” Holly Cartner, the group’s Europe and Central Asia director, said in a statement.

The EU committee’s final conclusions also accuse the former German Socialist-Green government of a failure to work for the release of a Turkish-German former Guantanamo prisoner.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Tuesday rejected charges that he had known about a US offer in 2002 to release a German-born Turk from the US military prison at Guantanamo.

“I do not know about such an offer,” Steinmeier, speaking in German, told reporters in his first-ever comments on the allegations.

Kurnaz was not freed until August 2006 on the intervention of the present government led by Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Arriving at a meeting with the European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee in Brussels, Steinmeier said that the former German government had repeatedly tried to free Murat Kurnaz.

Kurnaz spent four-and-a-half years at Guantanamo on Cuba after his arrest as a suspected al-Qaeda supporter in Pakistan, shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

But EU lawmakers stressed that “according to confidential institutional information, the German government did not accept the US offer, made in 2002, to release Murat Kurnaz from Guantanamo.”

The documents were given to the committee by the German government on the condition of strict confidentiality, head of the special committee Carlos Coelho told reporters.

Meanwhile, German government sources told dpa, Tuesday that while there had been no formal offer by the US secret service to release Kurnaz, the CIA had come up with “certain ideas” in the case.

Steinmeier was head of the federal chancellery and coordinator of the country’s intelligence services under the then government of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

“On various occasions, we made efforts for a release (of Kurnaz),” Steinmeier said. Charges that the former government had obstructed a release of Kurnaz were “firstly wrong and simply mean,” he added.

The minister said that the alleged US offer would be discussed by a parliamentary panel currently investigating whether the country’s foreign intelligence service BND breached German laws while assisting US anti-terrorism operations after September 11.

"I will contribute my share to reach a complete clarification (of the case) in the panel," Steinmeier said.

Germany currently runs the rotating EU presidency.

US President George W Bush last September for the first time acknowledged that the CIA was running secret prisons for holding and interrogating high-level al-Qaeda figures that had been captured since the September 11, 2001 attacks.

However, Bush did not give in to European calls to make the location of the camps public.

Clandestine detention centres, secret flights via or from Europe to countries where suspects could face torture, or extraordinary renditions would all breach the continent's human-rights conventions.

Allegations that CIA agents shipped prisoners through European airports to secret detention centres, including compounds in Eastern Europe, were first reported in November 2005.

The 48-member parliamentary committee started its probe in January 2006. It was working in tandem with an inquiry by the Council of Europe. However, the committee has no power to sanction European governments.

The Council of Europe, the continent's top human rights watchdog, said last year that European governments have violated human rights treaties by helping the US to transport terror suspects to other countries for interrogation.

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