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EU Lawmakers Allege Human Rights Violations

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BRUSSELS (AP) - European lawmakers said Wednesday they had discovered a "widespread regular practice" of human rights violations by the CIA in Europe.

The lawmakers said they had documented a series of incidents in which terror suspects were kidnapped by the CIA in Europe, or handed over to the agency by European officials in violation of human rights treaties.

They said they had also found that the CIA has conducted more than 1,000 undeclared flights over European territory since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks - some carrying suspected terrorists to countries where they could face torture.

The suspects often were transported across Europe by the same planes and groups of people working for the CIA, the lawmakers said in a preliminary report.

"After 9/11, within the framework of the fight against terrorism, the violation of human and fundamental rights was not isolated or an excessive measure confined to a short period of time, but rather a widespread regular practice in which the majority of European countries were involved," said Italian lawmaker Giovanni Claudio Fava, who drafted the report.

The CIA declined to comment on the report.

A spokeswoman for Fava said he was referring to "extraordinary renditions" of terror suspects by American agents in Europe outside the established system of international law. She said he also was referring to allegations outside his jurisdiction, such as the U.S. treatment of detainees at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, U.S. cooperation with Uzbekistan, which is accused of torturing detainees, and American renditions outside Europe.

The European inquiry started in January after media reports that U.S. intelligence officers interrogated al-Qaeda suspects at secret prisons in eastern Europe and transported some on secret flights that passed through Europe.

The focus of the inquiry changed as people who said they were abducted by U.S. agents gave detailed accounts of transfers to what they called secret detention centers in the Middle East, Asia and North Africa.

Secret stopovers in Europe en route to countries where suspects could face torture, and extraordinary renditions of detainees would breach the continent's human rights treaties.

As of late December, some 100 to 150 people have been seized in "renditions" involving taking terror suspects off the street of one country and flying them to their home country or another where they are wanted for a crime or questioning. Government officials have said the action is reserved for those considered by the CIA to be the most serious terror suspects. Mistakes, however, have been made, and are being investigated by the CIA's inspector general.

Intelligence officials have said that many of the secret flights are more likely to be carrying staff, supplies or Director Porter Goss on his way to a foreign visit, rather than suspected terrorists.

All the officials spoke on condition of anonymity because of the subject's sensitivity.

EU lawmakers based their preliminary report on data from Eurocontrol, the European Union's air safety agency, and three months of hearings that included more than 50 hours of testimony by EU officials, rights groups and individuals who said they were kidnapped by U.S. agents and tortured.

Data showed that CIA planes made numerous stops on European territory that were never declared, violating an international treaty that requires airlines to declare the route and stopovers for planes with a police mission, Fava said.

"The routes for some of these flights seem to be quite suspect. ... They are rather strange routes for flights to take. It is hard to imagine ... those stopovers were simply for providing fuel," he said.

He cited the alleged transfer of an Egyptian cleric abducted from a Milan street in 2003, a German who claimed he was transferred from Macedonia to Afghanistan, and the transfer of a Canadian citizen from New York to Syria, among other suspect flights.

Documents provided by Eurocontrol showed Khalid al-Masri, the German, was transferred to Afghanistan in 2004 by a plane that originated in Algeria and flew via Palma de Mallorca, Spain, Skopje, Macedonia, and Baghdad, Iraq before landing in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Al-Masri, who was born in Kuwait, had told the European Parliament committee earlier this year he was arrested by U.S. intelligence agents on the Macedonian border while on vacation, taken to a hotel in Skopje, and imprisoned there for several weeks before being flown to Kabul and imprisoned for five months and tortured. He said he was flown back to Europe in May 2004 and released in Albania.

Fava called it unlikely that EU governments such as Italy, Bosnia and Sweden knew nothing about CIA operations.

The United States has not made any public comment on the allegations and the official line by EU governments and senior EU officials is that there has been no irrefutable proof of such renditions.

"We have no comment. We will wait for the investigation to finish," said Friso Roscam Abbing, spokesman for EU Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini.

Fava provided no evidence of secret CIA prisons on EU territory, saying the committee would turn their attention to alleged detention centers later and may go to Poland and Romania in September.

He said the committee plans to travel next month to Washington to discuss the allegations of renditions and secret prisons with lawmakers from U.S. Congress, top Bush administration officials and non-governmental organizations.