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Report: Two CIA Flights Stopped in France

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PARIS - Two flights chartered by the CIA made stopovers in France in 2002 and 2005, French newspaper Le Figaro said Friday, adding to likely questions facing U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice when she visits Europe next week.

A French Foreign Ministry official said authorities were checking with civil aviation authorities whether the flights, first mentioned Thursday in the New York Times and Britain's Guardian newspaper, did indeed take place.

"It is perfectly possible there were flights," said spokesman Jean-Baptiste Mattei. The ministry had previously said it had no knowledge of any CIA flights in France.

Le Figaro said the first flight identified took place on March 31, 2002. The Learjet private plane stopped in the northwestern town of Brest on its way from Iceland to Turkey, with a planned stop in Rome, the newspaper said.

Authorities at the airport told the Figaro that the crew had indicated it was alone on board the aircraft, it added.

The second flight stopped over near Paris on July 20, 2005, arriving from Norway, Le Figaro said, quoting as its source the Norwegian newspaper Ny Tid. This airplane, a Gulfstream III jet, had landed six times at the U.S. base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, it added.

Several European governments have launched investigations into whether covert CIA flights were used in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, to transfer Islamist suspects to third countries where they could be interrogated beyond the reach of international law.

Questioned about the media reports regarding the French flights, Defense Ministry spokesman Jean-Francois Bureau said officials had no evidence of such landings.

"To my knowledge, we have no facts that corroborate that," Bureau told reporters Thursday.

Le Figaro said it was possible for the flights to have gone undetected by French officials because private flights from outside the Europe's "Schengen" passport-free zone could transit freely through France, provided they gave their flight plan.