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Why the CIA's Secret Flights Irk Europeans

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Stoking the smoldering international controversy over America's conduct of its war on terror, a European Parliament inquiry has found that the CIA carried out as many as 1,000 secret flights through Europe since the 9/11 attacks.

With details that might conjure up movie scripts, an interim report by a committee investigating such activity alleges that the CIA occasionally snatched suspects from city streets and whisked them away to far countries or to the US detention facility in Guantanamo, Cuba.

The allegations have so far created few official waves, coming as they do as European governments mull their own responses to international terrorism - and after reports late last year had already prompted a round of transatlantic diplomacy. But the response does indicate that the US has a black eye not so much with European governments, but with European publics. And it also hints - as the report alleges - that at least some European governments not only knew of the flights and transfers of suspected terrorists, but also cooperated with them.

"These investigations and the fact that in this case it's coming out of the European Parliament suggest how this is more a reflection of European public opinion - and the publics here are very suspicious of what the US is doing," says Karen Donfried, an expert in transatlantic relations at the German Marshall Fund in Washington.

The European Parliament is an elected body but has few powers and is considered the weakest branch within the Brussels-based European Union bureaucracy - though it's also the closest thing to a barometer of public concerns.

Ms. Donfried, reached during a visit to Brussels where the new report was released, says she doubts the allegations will have a "large impact" in official circles, in part because of earlier indications that European governments were not uniformly in the dark on the CIA practices.

In fact, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said during past consultations with European officials that the US always respected the "sovereignty" of all its allies, recalls Donfried, a former State Department policy planning official. "What that says in so many words is that at some level these countries knew what was going on."

For example, in public comments Wednesday, Italian Socialist Claudio Fava, leader of the European Parliament inquiry, said it was "improbable" that the Milan "kidnapping" by CIA agents of Egyptian cleric Abu Omar in February 2003 was undertaken "without the previous knowledge of Italian authorities and security services."

Luca Ferrari, a spokesman for the Italian Embassy in Washington, said he could not comment on the Omar allegations because they are part of judicial proceedings in Italy. But he says the issue of secret CIA flights in Europe has "become a non-issue" in Italy.

"There was a moment when there was more intense attention," Mr. Ferrari says. "But generally the public and the opposition accepted the government's explanation on this, that there are no secret prisons and no flights in Italy." He also says Italy's recent elections and formation of a new government, as well as news that three Italian soldiers were killed in Iraq Wednesday, probably distracted any interest that Mr. Fava's report might have generated.

Another European official says that while the controversy has tended to die down in Europe, it could revive as national parliaments begin reviewing findings by inquiry commissions set up after revelations first came out last winter. The diplomat, who requested anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the topic, notes that Germany, for example, will hold parliamentary hearings on May 11, "when the government has to say what it did and didn't know."

The diplomat echoes Donfried's interpretation of Secretary Rice's words as implying that governments knew to varying degrees what the CIA was doing. "It's absolutely true that at the time [of the first revelations last winter] there were no flat-out denials," the diplomat says.

For its part, the CIA has responded to the European Parliament report by reiterating that transferring international terror suspects - a practice known as "rendition" - has been CIA policy for decades. But it denies undertaking what is called "extraordinary rendition," or the transfer of suspects to third countries where torture is known to be used.

Donfried says the "varied spectrum" of European treatment of terrorism issues is another explanation for the muted official response to the findings. She notes that France is "very tough" on suspected terrorists: Despite a very public falling-out with the US over Iraq, France has remained one of the US's closest collaborators on intelligence and fighting international terrorism.

European officials have also shied away from taking a "holier than thou" approach with the US as differences have been over- ridden by a sense of facing a common enemy - especially as Europe has been hit by terror attacks carried out by Islamist extremists.

But European countries still are more apt to see the fight against terrorism as a police and intelligence matter and eschew calling it a "war" as the US does. Cooperation, however, has tended to overcome such philosophical disputes.

Before German Chancellor Angela Merkel's first official visit to the US last January, she sharply criticized the US for keeping the detention facility in Guantanamo, but once in Washington she dropped the public rebukes. German officials say she brought up the issue with President Bush, but insisted that she was speaking "not from some moral high ground but in the hopes of seeing the US live up to its values," as one official with knowledge of the meeting says.

That overarching "we're in this together" sense appears to be growing, even as reports such as this week's from the European Parliament cause periodic outcries.

As one example, former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar is calling for NATO to adopt the battle against Islamist extremism as one of its central objectives. Mr. Aznar says NATO should assert its identity as an alliance of democracies with a wider vision than Atlantic security, and decide at its next summit in December to collectively address global terrorism.