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Washington Seeks EU Aid to Refute Rendition Flights.

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The top legal adviser to Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, has urged European Union governments to help Washington refute claims that hundreds of CIA flights used European airspace and airports to transport detainees to countries in which they may face torture.

John Bellinger was reacting to claims by a European parliament investigation that hundreds of CIA flights have crossed the Continent - a process it linked to the practice of "rendition" or extra-legal abduction.

Amnesty International, the human rights group, has also alleged that almost 1,000 CIA flights have called at third-country airports, including European ones. The figure has been repeated by members of the European parliament.

Mr Bellinger said: "The unchallenged allegation that all of these flights have got detainees on them is absurd. Someone needs to challenge that. It is not possible for the US to prove a negative. But responsible European officials need to say this has got out of hand."

Amnesty responded: "No one's made the comment that all flights contain detainees. The issue clearly is that a huge number of flights are being made into European and other airports by CIA planes, some of which are known to be linked to rendition."

Mr Bellinger's comments came as a 30-strong US delegation prepared for today's hearing by the United Nations committee on torture in Geneva. It will be the first time since the September 11 attacks that Washington has been called upon by an international forum to defend its record on torture.

The US will answer questions on the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mr Bellinger would not say how many rendition flights had taken place but said some carried only agents or evidence. The suggestion that a big number had detainees on them destined for mistreatment was absurd.

Asked whether flights were continuing, he said: "I would not necessarily assume that at all. The last allegation of a rendition was something like three years ago."

He said it was wrong to assume that intelligence flights were improper. But Amnesty says it has evidence of rendition of suspects as recently as 2004.

Mr Bellinger said: "We have thought about trying to deny individual allegations because so many were wrong. Ultimately we concluded it was not possible to go into the business of confirming or denying."

Additional reporting by Frances Williams in Geneva