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EU Lawmakers to Check "No Guantanamo" in Europe

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BRUSSELS, Jan 18 (Reuters) - The credibility of the European Union is at stake over accusations the CIA ran secret prisons in the bloc, a top European lawmaker said on Wednesday as the European Parliament formally launched a probe into the scandal.

"There must be no Guantanamo on European soil," foreign affairs committee chair Elmar Brok told Reuters, referring to the controversial U.S. detention centre in Cuba.

"We want to be clear to our people and to the rest of the world that we do not violate human rights."

The decision to create a European Parliament committee to look into media and rights group allegations of CIA detention centres in EU member and candidate countries was taken last week by political leaders in the assembly.

The panel was launched on Wednesday in Strasbourg and has no investigative powers and its mandate is to collect and analyse information on the allegations.

The newspaper reports and human rights groups have said the United States ran centres in eastern Europe where suspects were interrogated, tortured or transported to other countries in a process that Washington calls "rendition".

Romania, Poland and others have denied they let the United States hold terrorism suspects on their territory. The U.S. government has neither denied nor confirmed the reports of secret jails, first made by the Washington Post in November.

The Council of Europe, a human rights body comprising EU member states and other countries, has launched its own investigation and its preliminary results will be announced on Jan. 23 by lead investigator Dick Marty a Swiss senator.

He said last week he believed European governments had been complicit in illegal CIA activities in the "war on terror".

A British member of the European Parliament, Sarah Ludford, said the parliamentary committee would put political pressure on member states to come up with the truth about the allegations.

Ludford, from the Liberal group and who is tipped by lawmakers to act as vice chairman of the committee, said the panel ought to summon top EU officials, such as foreign policy chief Javier Solana, visit sites believed to have been used by the CIA and speak to people who were alleged to have been abducted.

The chairs and members of the new committee are due to be appointed on Thursday.

Although no date for a first meeting has been decided yet, the 46-member committee is likely to start working as early as next week, a European Parliament spokesman said.

"It is clear we need cooperation with the United States against terrorism, but it should be in a way that is in accordance with our values", Brok said.