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CIA row hits US-Europe intelligence work-US lawyer

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BRUSSELS, May 4 (Reuters) - Allegations that CIA flights through Europe carried detainees bound for ill-treatment are damaging transatlantic intelligence cooperation, a lawyer acting for the U.S. State Department said on Thursday.

Speaking before heading the defence of U.S. practices at the the U.N. Committee against Torture in Geneva, John Bellinger reiterated Washington's position that it does not outsource torture or transfer suspects abroad expecting torture.

Bellinger was responding to a European Parliament probe which, while producing no firm evidence, concluded last month that more than 1,000 CIA flights had transited the EU and that the CIA had been responsible on several occasions for kidnapping and illegally detaining alleged terrorists on EU soil.

"The suggestion that intelligence flights are somehow engaged in illegal activity really undermines the cooperation between the United States and Europe," he told a news briefing.

EU lawmakers are due in Washington next week to probe allegations of secret detention centres and flights in Europe for terror suspects. Bellinger is among those they will meet.

Bellinger said he did not have any information as to how many flights there had been, but the suggestion that a large number had detainees aboard was "absurd".

"Someone needs to challenge that," he said. "It's not possible for the United States to prove a negative, but responsible European governments or responsible European officials simply need to say this has gotten out of hand."

"There is no evidence for the suggestion or implication that however many flights there have been that they have all got detainees on them or that an intelligence flight is engaged in some sort of improper activity."

RENDITION CASES RARE

He said there had been "very few" cases of renditions, or the transfer of terrorism suspects from one country to another, but declined to provide details.

So many allegations about intelligence flights were incorrect that the U.S. government had decided not to respond to specific charges, nor to give details of the purpose of every flight, given operational security requirements, he said.

"Intelligence activities by their very nature are simply carried out in secret because you don't want to tell the al Qaeda people that you may have captured their material or you are engaged in cooperation," he said.

Bellinger said there was "understandable uncomfortableness" about the holding of al Qaeda suspects at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, but there were not many suggestions as to an alternative.

"There have been a number of voices recently calling for closure of Guantanamo, but none of those who have called for closure of have suggested an alternative," he said.

A Washington Post report last year that the CIA had run secret prisons in Europe and flown suspects to states where they would have been tortured unleashed a spate of investigations, but none have so far produced a "smoking gun", or solid proof.