

Yes, they did use torture on British territory.....

Those with long memories will remember the outcry when, over 40 years ago, the population of Diego Garcia was forcibly resettled to Mauritius to enable the USA to establish a military base on the island. Diego Garcia, set in the middle of the Indian Ocean, was claimed by the British in 1814 but only established as British territory in 1965. Although the indigenous population's right to return has been upheld in the High Court, this has been blocked by the USA and the island is currently populated only by US military personnel. There is a large naval ship and submarine support base, a military air base, communications and space-tracking facility, and an anchorage for pre-positioned military supplies for regional operations in the lagoon.

In spite of its sole use as a US facility, it remains British territory. Recent reports indicate that on this territory, prisoners have been held and have been tortured.

In 2008 the UK government was forced to acknowledge that Diego Garcia had been used as an important part of the infamous CIA "rendition" flights - an accusation which had been categorically denied by Jack Straw in 2005. Evidence of this usage has either been withheld or destroyed - there are claims that documentation suffered "water damage" during "extremely heavy weather" - in a month where there was hardly any rain.¹



In early 2015, Lawrence Wilkerson, who had been Chief of Staff to Colin Powell in the US State Department, revealed that Diego Garcia had been used by the CIA as "a transit site where people were temporarily housed, let us say, and interrogated from time to time." He further said that people had been held for several weeks on end and subjected to "nefarious activities."²

The Guardian reported that in an interview with Vice News, a New York-based global news channel, Wilkerson said that three separate US intelligence sources had informed him that the CIA had used Diego Garcia in this way. A spokesman for Reprieve pointed out that UK ministers had consistently claimed that no CIA detainees had been held there, but Colonel Wilkerson's statements suggested that either the UK ministers had been lying, or that they had been lied to.

The British government needs to own up to the part played by UK territory in the CIA torture programme.

1 <http://www.reprieve.org.uk/case-study/diego-garcia/>

2 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/30/cia-interrogation-diego-garcia-lawrence-wilkerson>

Wilkerson is not the only person to have spoken out on this. Barry McCaffrey, a retired four-star American general, has spoken publicly about the use of Diego Garcia to detain subjects and Manfred Nowak, a former UN special rapporteur on torture, has also stated that he has heard from reliable sources of prisoners being held by the US on ships in the Indian Ocean. Dirk Marty, a Swiss senator who led a Council of Europe investigation into CIA use of European territory and air-space, had also received confirmation of the use of the atoll for rendition purposes.

What did the UK government actually say?

Tony Blair, when Prime Minister, and Jack Straw as Foreign Secretary, both denied the use of the atoll during the rendition programme. In March 2007, Tony Blair gave an assurance to the Intelligence and Security Committee that he was satisfied that the US had at no time since 9/11 rendered an individual through the UK or through our overseas territories. In its report on rendition of 28 June 2007, the ISC said: *“We are satisfied that there is no evidence that US rendition flights have used UK airspace (except the two cases in 1998 referred to earlier in this Report) and that there is no evidence of them having landed at UK military airfields.”*

This unequivocal statement was however refuted a year later by David Miliband, when he said: *“I am very sorry indeed to have to report to the House the need to correct those and other statements on the subject, on the basis of new information passed to officials on 15 February 2008 by the US Government.*

*Contrary to earlier explicit assurances that Diego Garcia had not been used for rendition flights, recent US investigations have now revealed two occasions, both in 2002, when that had in fact occurred. An error in the earlier US records search meant that those cases did not come to light. In both cases, a US plane with a single detainee on board refuelled at the US facility in Diego Garcia. The detainees did not leave the plane, and the US Government have assured us that no US detainees have ever been held on Diego Garcia. US investigations show no record of any other rendition through Diego Garcia or any other overseas territory, or through the UK itself, since then.”*³

When asked about the comments recently made by Colonel Wilkerson, a spokesperson for the UK government repeated the statement that they had been assured by the US government that there had been no other instances of US intelligence flights landing in UK overseas territories apart from the two cases mentioned by David Miliband.

Evidence to the contrary?

According to answers given to parliamentary questions, British military officials - who are nominally in command of the atoll - re-designated another building as a prison three months after the September 11 attacks.

The role of Diego Garcia in the CIA programme came back into the headlines after documents found in Libya in 2011 showed that it was listed on a CIA rendition flight plan for a Libyan Islamist Abdel-Hakim Belhadj and his wife Fatima Boudchar in March 2004.⁴ They were picked up in Bangkok and flown to Libya, stopping for re-fuelling in Diego Garcia on the way. This enabled them to be delivered to a high-security prison in Libya, where they were both tortured and where Belhadj remained for four years.

3 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080221/debtext/80221-0008.htm>

4 <http://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/global-rendition/the-detainees/abdel-hakim-belhadj-&-fatima-bouchar.html>

Although the Belhadj/Boudchar case might well fit in with the government's claim that “nobody left the plane”, the fact remains that Diego Garcia was used as a stepping-stone to torture. The government response December 2012 was simply to state: “No flights with a detainee on board landed on Diego Garcia in March 2004,”

Other evidence, however, tells us that prisoners were held on Diego Garcia. A CIA report leaked in early 2014 contradicts the British government's repeated denials that it had allowed the US to use Diego Garcia for its “extraordinary rendition” programme. According to the report, the alleged Diego Garcia “black site” was used to hold some “high-value” detainees and was made with the “full cooperation” of the UK government.⁵ Although the document (of which the executive summary is 500 pages long) is now in the public domain, the version visible to the public is heavily redacted.⁶

According to investigations by the Daily Telegraph in 2014, Tony Blair was kept informed “every step of the way” by MI6.⁷ A security source told the newspaper that both Blair and Straw were fully briefed on CIA activities and were shown legal opinions of President Bush's administration which declared “enhanced interrogation” techniques such as water-boarding to be legal. According to this source, the politicians took a very active in this and were fully aware of what was going on.

What next?

In 2010, David Cameron promised an independent, judge-led inquiry into this issue.⁸ In 2013, however, he handed the task to the Intelligence and Security Committee, despite concerns from both NGOs and MPs that this could result in a white-wash.⁹ Nine organisations, including Reprieve, Amnesty International and Liberty, said that they had lost all trust in the ISC's ability to uncover the truth about the UK's role in torture and rendition. In January 2015, Cameron wrote to Reprieve conceding that an independent inquiry may still be needed after the ISC report has been completed.¹⁰ This was in response to a letter from a number of NGOs urging Mr Cameron to return to his original pledge of an independent, judge-led inquiry.

Clare Algar, Reprieve's Executive Director, said: *“This suggests that even the Prime Minister thinks the ISC won't get to the bottom of British involvement in torture. So why doesn't David Cameron just stick to his original promise of an independent, judge-led inquiry? The British public deserve to know what part the UK played in the CIA's shameful torture programme - but the ISC lacks the powers and the independence needed to be sure of getting to the truth.”*

What can Friends do?

We can inform ourselves about the murky history of British involvement in Diego Garcia and especially the claims of our collusion in rendition and torture. Cont..

5 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10758747/British-gave-full-co-operation-for-CIA-black-jail-on-Diego-Garcia-report-claims.html>

6 <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/study2014/executive-summary.pdf>

7 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/tony-blair/10747166/Tony-Blair-knew-all-about-CIA-secret-kidnap-programme.html>

8 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100706/debtext/100706-0001.htm#10070631000627>

9 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/08/british-torture-inquiry-boycotted-rights-groups>

10 <http://www.reprieve.org.uk/press/new-torture-inquiry-may-be-necessary-concedes-pm/>

We can write to our MPs to demand that an independent inquiry is held and that we will finally be told the truth.

We must not allow our government to deny that the UK has colluded in the use of Diego Garcia as a staging-post or as a prison. That is the very least we owe to the individuals who have suffered through this collusion.

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