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PRESS RELEASE

MEPs say Washington visit shows CIA investigation must continue

"The aim of our visit to Washington was first and foremost to enter into a dialogue with our American friends in order to shed more light on the alleged practices" of illegal detention and transfer of prisoners by the CIA in Europe, said Carlos Coelho (EPP-ED, PT), chair of the committee investigating these allegations. "This cooperation should proceed in full transparency, avoiding recourse to practices similar to those used by terrorists."

Rapporteur Claudio Fava (PES, IT) told journalists: *"We are not a court, but we came here with the mandate to find out the truth and we got 'no comment' as a response", reacting to a meeting with the State Department. "I personally don't agree with some of the points they made: first, the idea that the US is in a state of war and that international law does not provide an adequate legal framework to deal with terrorists; second, the view that the UN Convention against Torture applies only to transfer of prisoners from or to the US and not to detentions in third countries". Nevertheless, he considered the meetings had made a useful contribution to the committee's work: "We come back from Washington with the feeling there is much more to be done, our works need to continue."*

US government responds to allegations

"The United States is at war against terrorism. We are attempting to keep our people safe. We know we are dealing with things in an imperfect fashion but sometimes we need to choose" - between security needs and human rights issues, US assistant Secretary of State Dan Fried told the delegation.

US State Department representatives acknowledged the existence of CIA flights in Europe but refused to comment on the alleged practice of extraordinary renditions there. *"There is nothing illegal in sending CIA flights to Europe in the context of our cooperation on intelligence matters. But we cannot enter into the business of confirming or denying all individual allegations", said John Bellinger, legal advisor to the State Department. "Many of the charges being made against us are plain absurd" and damage transatlantic relations, said Mr Fried.*

Mr Bellinger added: *"Every member of the press and NGOs has been digging and digging - but they were not able to find more than two or three cases, and all allegations mentioned date from two or three years ago. When a country receives such an unexpected terrorist attack as 9/11, it takes a certain time to organise the right response".*

Asked by Sarah Ludford (ALDE, UK) about the legality of keeping people incommunicado for an indefinite time and without a trial Mr Bellinger referred to Guantanamo, saying: *"Our point of departure is a war scenario which needs to follow war rules, and we have no doubt been using them in an imperfect way".* However, he categorically denied allegations that US policy was aimed at transferring terrorism suspects to third countries with the sole purpose of them being tortured there.

Views from Congress

The members of the committee also heard from Representatives Robert Wexler and Ed Markey, and Senator Richard Durbin – all Democrats – and Republican Senator Arlen Specter. *"Our laws prohibit torture and renditions are a type of torture. Sometimes there are tensions between the Congress and the Executive but the differences are ultimately solved at the judicial level. (...) The supreme court has already said that Bush does not have a blank cheque"* on these matters, he said.

Representative Wexler said extraordinary rendition operations may have happened in the past, but he did not think they went on regularly. *"My instinct tells me they are isolated cases, which doesn't change the principle one bit"* on the illegality of such activities, he said. *"I don't think these violations continue today and if it did and it is not being discussed in Congress it would be an outrage. However you have to understand the situation. You come from Europe and put us in a position where either we are with Bush or we take anti-American sentiments by supporting European criticism, and in this situation I have no choice but to be with Bush, as much as I can dislike his views"*.

The delegation of 13 MEPs also heard from a number of lawyers, NGO representatives and the former director of the CIA in 1993-95, James Woolsey. More information on all these meetings will be presented at a press conference at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, at 3pm on Tuesday 16 May.

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