

Alleged CIA detainee gives evidence to European Parliament

Khaled El Masri, a German citizen of Lebanese origin who says CIA agents kidnapped him and held him for five months at a secret prison in Afghanistan, told his story on Monday to the committee investigating possible illegal activities of the CIA in Europe. He said a German was involved in his detention: "I don't know if the German authorities were aware [of my case] but a German with no foreign accent at all travelled to Afghanistan and interrogated me several times."

Mr El Masri, who was finally released without charges, is suing the US intelligence agency for wrongful imprisonment and torture.

Manfred Gnjjidic, Mr El Masri's lawyer, said his client was captured while in Macedonia in December 2003, detained in a hotel in Skopje "by at least 9 Macedonians" for 23 days where he was interrogated, "degraded, photographed naked and beaten from all sides." He was later transported "blindfolded and hooded" to a secret prison in Afghanistan where he was held until the 27 May 2004. Responding Ignasi Guardans Cambó (ALDE, ES), Mr Gnjjidic confirmed that the plane used had been in Mallorca airport three hours earlier.

German involvement?

In Afghanistan, Mr El Masri said he was tortured and interrogated by several individuals who addressed him in Arabic "with a Palestinian accent". According to Mr El Masri, a German called 'Sam' and an American psychologist also interrogated him before he was finally released in an airport in Albania.

"I don't know if Sam worked for the German authorities or for the US authorities but he was undoubtedly German," said Mr El Masri in response to Parliament's rapporteur Claudio Fava (PES, IT). "Sam said the Americans didn't want to admit that they were involved. (...) He asked me whether I would go to the authorities or the press, and said 'you are intelligent enough, you know what I mean'. I took this as a warning." Months after his release, said his lawyer, someone claiming to be a German journalist helped Mr El Masri identify Sam through a photo as Gerhard Lehmann, but the journalist then vanished and never showed up again.

All MEPs who spoke thanked Mr El Masri for giving evidence, though some said there were inconsistencies and gaps in his account. Elmar Brok (EPP-ED, DE) said it was surprising that his wife and family had not denounced his disappearance and wondered why he has travelled alone to Macedonia as a tourist if he was having economic problems at home. Ignacio Salafranca (EPP-ED, ES) said "this is a Kafkaesque story". Jas Gawronski (EPP-ED, IT) asked Mr El Masri if he thought he had been kidnapped because of a mistaken identity or because of his "past activities in Lebanon". Mr El Masri confirmed that he had belonged to the Lebanese movement Al Tabid during the Lebanese civil war, at the age of 20. "I don't know if you can describe Al Tabid a radical movement; we were at war. We fought with guns, but we never used explosives," he said. Responding to Wolfgang Kreissl-Dörfler (PES, DE), he denied belonging to any other organisation since that time.

These questions irritated Kathalijne Buitenweg (Greens/EFA, NL): "We are trying to establish his guilt here... but that is not the point. No matter what his past, that is not justification for his torture!" Answering her question on how the committee investigation could help clarify Mr El Masri's case, Mr Gnjjidic said: "What we really need from you is a clear questioning of Macedonia's role. (...) It remains an unresolved question why the Macedonian authorities did not contact the German ones after the incident".

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Temporary Committee on the alleged use of European countries by the CIA for the transport and illegal detention of prisoners

Chair : Carlos COELHO (EPP-ED, PT)

Hearing of Khaled El Masri

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