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PRESS RELEASE

CIA activities: MEPs look into two more cases of extraordinary rendition

"I am a victim of extraordinary rendition", said Maher Arar, declaring himself ready to shed light on a practice he considers an illegal means of "outsourcing torture". "I am not a terrorist. I am not a member of al Qaeda" he told MEPs, as the committee investigating alleged CIA involvement in the illegal detention of prisoners in Europe discussed two specific cases of extraordinary rendition on Thursday.

Mr Arar, a Syrian-born Canadian citizen, explained that, returning from holiday in Tunisia in September 2002, he was detained at New York's JFK airport, where -- having initially been denied the right to a phone call and to speak to a lawyer, because, as he put it, *"I was not an American citizen"* -- he was interrogated by the New York Police, the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. Two weeks later, after being detained at a maximum security prison, he was chained, shackled and driven to a New Jersey airport to be flown -- by way of Washington, Rome, Amman and Athens -- to a military intelligence facility in Syria. He was to stay there for over ten months. He says he was tortured, abused and forced to make false confessions.

Initially denied access to a lawyer, Mr Arar was allowed to have sporadic contacts with Canadian diplomats in Syria, after a persistent campaign by his wife led to international pressure. *"The psychological pain"* arising from this experience, he told MEPs, *"is persistent"*. According to his lawyers, Mr Arar is still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. While in prison, he told the committee, he heard the voice of a German prisoner being tortured. This turned out to be another example of extraordinary rendition: he was a European citizen captured in Morocco and taken to Syria.

Stops in Italy and Greece

Rapporteur Giovanni Fava (PES, IT) asked whether he had ever been faced with specific charges. *"I was never charged with anything in any country,"* Mr Arar responded. Asked to give details of his stopover in Rome -- which Jas Gawronski (EPP-ED, IT) considered the most relevant part of his story, as far as the work of the committee is concerned -- Mr Arar explained that no-one boarded the aircraft in Rome. *"I was never seen or spoken to by any Italian official. The agents who accompanied me never identified themselves although I overheard they belonged to a 'special removal unit'"*. As to whether his journey to Athens could be corroborated, Mr Arar said Stephen Grey, the journalist who gave evidence to the committee earlier, had traced the flight and confirmed its route via Athens.

The Swedish case

The committee then heard from Kjell Jönsson, the lawyer of Mohammed El Zary, who, along with fellow Egyptian citizen Ahmed Agiza, had lived as a refugee in Sweden since 1991. In December 2001 the Swedish government expelled them to Egypt stating that they had connections to terrorist groups. The expulsion was carried out by hooded US agents who transferred him to an Egyptian jail by plane, accompanied during the flight by two Swedish policemen. *"The CIA offered their help to transfer both men on condition that the government did not reveal the diplomatic assurances"* given in cases of expulsion, said Mr Jönsson.

He explained that Mr El Zary was tortured for months then released without charge in October 2003. The Swedish government nevertheless banned him from entering Sweden for 10 years.

The two Swedish policemen witnessed El Zary being mistreated at the airport, which, said Mr Jönsson, should have been a strong signal of his fate in Egypt. Yet the authorities did not react and no action has been taken against the policemen. *"None of the guarantees or diplomatic assurances was respected when Sweden handed him to Egypt"*, he said. *"Now Sweden claims to have no legal responsibility over this case because El Zary was expelled and now responsibility falls on Egypt."*

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