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PRESS RELEASE

FYROM: "Contradictions" found in government's version of El Masri case

"No documentation was given to prove the version of the Macedonian authorities" on how Khaled El Masri voluntarily left FYROM crossing the land border to Kosovo, said the chair of the delegation which visited Skopje last 27-29 April, Sylvia Kaufmann (GUE/NGL, DE). Among the main conclusions of their visit, members said to have found several "contradictions" in the official version supported by the FYROM government.

Khaled El Masri, a German citizen of Lebanese origin who claims CIA agents kidnapped him in Skopje and held him for five months at a secret prison in Afghanistan, told his story to committee members in a former hearing in March. He then explained to members how "at least 9 Macedonians" detained him in a hotel in Skopje for 23 days where he was interrogated and he was later transported by plane, "blindfolded and hooded" to a secret prison in Afghanistan.

At the meeting today, Ms. Kaufmann appreciated the collaboration of Macedonian authorities, who confirmed for the first time that El Masri actually was in FYROM from 31 December 2003 to 23 January 2004. Yet, "some contradictions remain regarding the government official version", she said. The Minister of Interior Ljubomir Mihailovski had explained that when El Masri crossed the land border between FYROM and Kosovo border, control officials stamped his passport -- as is always the case, according to the government. However, she noted, members of the delegation did not receive any entry or exit stamps during their visit.

FYROM officials also failed to prove their story with documentation, while MEPs obtained evidence proving that a plane did indeed leave for Afghanistan that very day. It has been confirmed, added rapporteur Claudio Fava (PES, IT), that "flight N31P3, operated by the CIA, did take off on 23 January to Kabul via Bagdad and was also used to transfer people from Kabul to Guantanamo. That is why we continue thinking that this flight was used to transfer El Masri".

Nowak: US secret detention centres exist

"Secret detentions centres are illegal and one of the gravest violations of human rights, including the right to fair trial and human rights international law", said Manfred Nowak, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. It is evident that such centres existed, he claimed: "we have the knowledge of around 28 people who have been detained by the United States but we ignore where they are". He admitted, however, that he had no substantial evidence of any concrete locations of secret prisons.

Concerning the allegations on their existence in Europe, Mr. Nowak said: "this is a very serious European problem that needs to be solved by Europeans institutions", and this is why "I am not actively investigating in the EU member States". Yet he would be happy to visit any European country with the UN Committee on Prevention of Torture "if substantial evidence of a secret detention centre is provided".

Melin: Swedish authorities failed to act at Bromma

The committee also heard from Mats Melin, Swedish Chief Parliamentary Ombudsman, who shared details of his investigation into his government's expulsion of two Egyptian citizens -- Mohammed El Zary and Ahmed Agiza -- to Cairo back in December 2001. The expulsion -- which took place at Stockholm's Bromma Airport -- was carried out by US agents, who were subsequently accompanied by two Swedish policemen during the flight to Cairo. Both detainees were allegedly mistreated and tortured upon their arrival in Egypt.

The US agents present at Bromma, said Mr. Melin, cut off El Zary's and Agiza's clothing with scissors, piece by piece, draped them in hoods and chained them "*hand and foot*". The detainees were transported to Cairo bound to a pair of mattresses. "*I have no clue why this was necessary*", added Mr. Melin, referring to such procedures as "*degrading treatment*".

Mr. Melin's probe into these events, he told MEPs, showed that "*American [secret] services were much too actively involved in the events that took place*". The Americans, he argued, "*were doing the job of the Swedish authorities on Swedish territory*". Although the arrest and the expulsion had a legal basis, he said, "*there was no legal basis for the behaviour of the Swedish authorities*", who allowed the Americans to take over their own responsibilities.

Prompted by rapporteur Claudio Fava (PES, IT) to say whether any disciplinary action was taken against the policemen who took part in this physical delivery of the two Egyptians, Mr. Melin answered in the negative. "*I decided not to take any measures against these policemen*" -- he explained -- "*their main crime was that they were left to their own fate by their superiors*".

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