

Officials: Lithuania Hosted Secret CIA Prison To Get "Our Ear"

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A third European country has been identified to ABC News as providing the CIA with facilities for a secret prison for high-value al Qaeda suspects: Lithuania, the former Soviet state.

Former CIA officials directly involved or briefed on the highly classified program tell ABC News that Lithuanian officials provided the CIA with a building on the outskirts of Vilnius, the country's capital, where as many as eight suspects were held for more than a year, until late 2005 when they were moved because of public disclosures about the program. Flight logs viewed by ABC News confirm that CIA planes made repeated flights into Lithuania during that period.

The CIA told ABC News that reporting the location of the now-closed prison was "irresponsible."

"The CIA does not publicly discuss where facilities associated with its past detention program may or may not have been located," said CIA spokesman Paul Gimigliano. "We simply do not comment on those types of claims, which have appeared in the press from time to time over the years. The dangers of airing such allegations are plain. These kinds of assertions could, at least potentially, expose millions of people to direct threat. That is irresponsible."

Former CIA officials tell ABC News that the prison in Lithuania was one of eight facilities the CIA set-up after 9/11 to detain and interrogate top al Qaeda operatives captured around the world. Thailand, Romania, Poland, Morocco, and Afghanistan have previously been identified as countries that housed secret prisons for the CIA.

According to a former intelligence official involved in the program, the former Soviet Bloc country agreed to host a prison because it wanted better relations with the U.S. Asked whether the Bush administration or the CIA offered incentives in return for allowing the prison, the official said, "We didn't have to." The official said, "They were happy to have our ear."

Through their embassy in Washington, the Lithuanian government denied hosting a secret CIA facility.

"The Lithuanian Government denies all rumors and interpretations about alleged secret prison that supposedly functioned on Lithuanian soil and possibly was used by [CIA]," said Tomas Gulbinas, an embassy spokesman.

CIA Secret Prisons

According to two top government officials at the time, revelations about the existence of prisons in Eastern Europe in late 2005 by the Washington Post and ABC News led the CIA to close its facilities in Lithuania and Romania and move the al Qaeda prisoners out of Europe. The so-called High Value Detainees (HVD) were moved into "war zone" facilities, according to one of the former CIA officials, meaning they were moved to Iraq and Afghanistan. Within nine months, President Bush announced the existence of the program and ordered the transfer of 14 of the detainees, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Ramzi bin al Shihb and Abu Zubaydah, to Guantanamo, where they remain in CIA custody.

The CIA high value detainee (HVD) program began after the March 2002 capture of Abu Zubaydah. Within days, the CIA arranged for Zubaydah to be flown to Thailand. Later, in mid-2003 after Thai government and intelligence officials became nervous about hosting a secret prison for Zubaydah and a second top al Qaeda detainee, according to a former CIA officer involved in the program. One was transferred to a facility housed on a Polish intelligence base in December 2002, said a former official involved with transferring detainees. The facility was known as Ruby Base, according to two former CIA officials familiar with the location.

One of the former CIA officers involved in the secret prison program allowed ABC News to view flight logs that show aircraft used to move detainees to and from the secret prisons in Lithuania, Thailand, Afghanistan, Poland, Romania, Morocco and Guantanamo Bay. The purpose of the flights, said the officer, was to move terrorist suspects. The official told ABC News that the CIA arranged for false flight plans to be submitted to European aviation

authorities. Planes flying into and out of Lithuania, for example, were ordered to submit paperwork that said they would be landing in nearby countries, despite actually landing in Vilnius, he said. "Finland and Poland were used most frequently" as false destinations, the former CIA officer told ABC News. A similar system was used to land planes in Romania and Poland.

Interrogation and Detention Program

Lithuania, Poland, and Romania have all ratified the U.N. Convention Against Torture as well as the European Convention on Human Rights. All three countries' legal systems prohibit torture and extrajudicial detention. Polish authorities are currently conducting an investigation into whether any Polish law was broken by government officials there in hosting one of the secret prisons, according to a published report in the German magazine Der Spiegel.

"There are important legal issues at stake," said human rights researcher John Sifton. "As with Poland and Romania, CIA personnel involved in any secret detentions and interrogations in Lithuania were not only committing violations of U.S. federal law and international law, they were also breaking Lithuanian laws relating to lawless detention, assault, torture, and possibly war crimes. Lithuanian officials who worked with the CIA were breaking applicable Lithuanian laws as well."

Washington has been sharply divided over whether investigations into the interrogation and detention program should be opened. The CIA has been ordered by a federal judge to declassify and release much of the agency's inspector general report about the first years of the program by next week.

Attorney General Eric Holder has said that he is weighing whether he should appoint a special prosecutor to investigate alleged abuses in the program after reading the IG report. At issue are instances of abuse that went beyond the guidelines set up by the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC), which included waterboarding and sleep deprivation of up to 11 days, according to people aware of Holder's thinking. President Obama has called the practices "torture" and abolished the program within a few days of taking office this year. But the president has also said that his administration intended to "look forward" not backward at Bush-era policies of interrogation and detention.

One current intelligence official involved in declassifying the IG report told ABC News that the unredacted portions will reveal how and when CIA interrogators used methods and tactics that were not permitted by the OLC. "The focus will be on the cases where rules were broken," the official said. "But remember that all instances were referred to the Justice Department and only one resulted in a prosecution," said the official, referring to the conviction of CIA contractor David Passaro, who beat an Afghan detainee to death in 2003.

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