

Milan judges issued European arrest warrants for 22 CIA agents accused of abducting Egyptian cleric

CIA men wanted on EU warrants

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Judges seek 22 agents suspected of snatching Milan cleric (ANSA) – Rome, December 23 – Milan judges on Friday issued European arrest warrants for 22 CIA agents accused of abducting an Egyptian cleric in the city in 2003 .

The warrants mean the agents are now officially wanted in most countries in the world, judicial sources said .

Justice Minister Roberto Castelli immediately demanded all documents relating to the case, since he has to rule on a request to have the agents extradited from the United States .

His action was praised by a fellow member of Premier Silvio Berlusconi's cabinet who said the "utmost caution" should be used in cases relating to "terrorists who have shown they will stop at nothing". Milan prosecutors requested the extradition of the CIA agents last month .

The government can decide not to forward the request and there is no deadline by which it must choose one course or the other .

On Friday, it was learned that the prosecutors have also asked for permission to question witnesses in the US .

Abu Omar, the former imam of Milan's main mosque, disappeared mysteriously on February 17, 2003. At the time the Egyptian national was being probed by Milan investigators, suspected of having links to international terrorism .

Prosecutors believe he was abducted by the CIA as part of its covert programme – called 'extraordinary rendition' – in which suspected terrorists are transferred without court approval to third countries for interrogation .

In June this year a Milan judge signed arrest warrants for 13 people that prosecutors say made up the CIA team which carried out the kidnapping. Nine more warrants were issued later .

The Italian government has repeatedly said it knew nothing of the abduction. Members of the opposition have voiced "perplexity" that such an operation could have been carried out without authorities knowing .

If the Italian government forwards the extradition requests to Washington, the US would only have to consider handing over 20 of the named agents. Two of them are believed to have diplomatic status, so would be untouchable .

According to Italian investigators, Abu Omar was forced into a van in broad daylight as he walked to the Milan mosque. Either then, or some time later, he was taken to the US air base at Aviano in northern Italy, they believe .

Prosecutors also say they have found evidence of the cleric being taken to another US base, at Ramstein in Germany, before finally ending up in prison in Cairo .

He was released in April 2004 and placed under house arrest, at which point he phoned his wife in Italy and said he had been tortured. He is currently reported to be back in prison in Cairo .

The Corriere della Sera newspaper recently published a photo of Abu Omar taken on the Milan street where he was abducted. It said the photo was taken by CIA agents a month before he was seized .

According to the daily, the photo was retrieved by Milanese investigators from the computer of Robert Seldon Lady, the CIA chief in Milan until 2003 .

Justice Minister Castelli met his US counterpart, Alberto Gonzales, for the first time in Washington last month. The minister said that their talks had touched on a number of extradition cases, but declined to give details .

The case of Abu Omar, whose full name is Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, is sensitive because of its implication that the CIA ignored Italy's national sovereignty .

It has also risked further straining US-Italian relations after the emotional upheaval of a 'friendly fire' killing of an Italian agent by American troops in Iraq earlier this year .

A preliminary hearings judge in Milan has also just opened procedures expected to lead to a request by prosecutors for the extradition of Abu Omar himself from Egypt .

The judge noted that according to press reports he was in the Al Tora jail in Cairo. He said the justice and interior ministry had not yet answered prosecutors requests for official action to verify the imam's presence there .

Possible reasons for a CIA operation to seize Abu Omar were examined last summer by the US weekly Newsweek, which noted that the abduction came just a month before the US-led invasion of Iraq .

The CIA probably wanted to find out from the Milan imam what ties existed between Saddam Hussein and the Ansar al Islam terror group, using the information to protect US troops, the weekly said .

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