

RENDITION: Thousands of “Suspects” have “Disappeared”: Shedding Light on North Carolina’s “Rendition” Connection

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The 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks was a searing reminder of the pain felt by those who lost loved ones on that day and in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. New York City opened a stunning memorial, which allowed all of us to remember and grieve.

A very different panorama greets the families who last week marked a related anniversary – the opening of the Guantánamo Detention Camp on Jan. 11, 2002, and the beginning of the Bush administration’s embrace of what Vice President Dick Cheney termed “the dark side.”

In 10 years, thousands of suspects have been detained or even “disappeared,” secretly taken on American orders to be interrogated and sometimes tortured all over the world. Some were no doubt guilty. But many were not. All were treated without regard for due process, making a mockery of our commitment to human rights. On this 10th anniversary, the victims of “extraordinary rendition” and torture and their families are largely alone and forgotten.

North Carolina played a crucial role in this abuse. Aero Contractors, the CIA-affiliated aviation company headquartered at the Johnston County Airport in Smithfield, transported dozens of men to overseas jails. In places like Uzbekistan, Romania and Egypt, North Carolina-based pilots and crews delivered prisoners to jails where they were held incommunicado and savagely tortured. Sometimes, the torturers were U.S. officials; other times, Americans had others do the dirty work.

Much of the information obtained was questionable at best and often wrong, making America less – not more – safe.

Extraordinary rendition is a clear violation of international law and U.S. treaty obligations. Many of its victims have since been released, with no charges filed and no apology or restitution.

Students at the UNC School of Law Immigration/Human Rights Policy clinic examined key cases and hundreds of documents, including declassified U.S. government records. They have found that different levels of North Carolina government cooperated with Aero Contractors in abetting human rights abuses.

This connection is significant and shocking. Our elected officials can no longer shrug off these links to serious human rights abuses. As a state, we have a legal duty to investigate

why and how our tax dollars supported torture.

The example of Italian Abou Elkassim Britel is chilling. A translator, Britel was on a business trip in Pakistan when officials arrested him after a routine document check wrongly deemed his passport as fake. Transported by an Aero-operated plane to Morocco, he was beaten, then taken to a prison known for torture. During the next eight and a half months, Britel was tortured and threatened with having his genitals cut off. He was eventually released.

In a letter that she had written, which was read to the Johnston County commissioners on Oct. 3 of last year, Britel's wife, Khadija Anna Lucia Pighizzini, said that he continues to suffer from dizziness and chronic diarrhea. He has permanent damage to his left eye and ear.

The efforts of victims to sue for damages in U.S. courts have been blocked by both the Bush and Obama administrations. They claim that investigating the past would reveal "state secrets." But there are few secrets to be revealed. Many of these men, now released and trying to remake their lives, have recounted in devastating detail how they were tortured. Our government should not resort to the use of a narrow legal privilege to evade accountability.

The UNC report, to be released this week, has been endorsed by Prof. Manfred Nowak, the former U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture, as well as other human rights defenders. As a state, we have much to do.

First, we must hold our own inquiry into how state resources were used to abet human rights violations. These men should be allowed to tell our citizens how they were treated and how that hurt them and their families. Once we have the facts, we can determine how North Carolina could hold Aero accountable under existing law for crimes such as kidnapping and felonious restraint and assault – even if such conspiracies were entered into outside our borders. If possible, there should be restitution, so these families can obtain the services they need to heal.

Finally, we need to ensure this doesn't happen again, by passing laws that make abetting torture a felony. Americans cannot allow our elected leaders to sweep this history under the rug. If the federal government won't investigate, North Carolina should lead the way to justice.

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