

CIA shames us abroad beyond drones

By: Nat Hentoff – February 20, 2013

I am interrupting the end of my series on Barack Obama's nonexistent legal justification for drone killings because of a breaking news story deeply submerged in last week's New York Times.

A former Italian military intelligence chief and his former deputy were sentenced to prison (10 years and 9 years, respectively) for assisting the CIA in 2003 with the rendition of Egyptian Muslim cleric Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, also known as Abu Omar, who was kidnapped from the streets of Milan and, later, tortured in Egypt ("Italy Jails Ex-Officials for Rendition," Gaia Pianigiani, The New York Times, Feb. 13).

Furthermore, not many Americans probably know that, last year, Italy's Supreme Court "upheld the conviction of 23 CIA agents and also ordered a re-trial for five Italian ex-spies who were also accused of taking part in the abduction and rendition to Egypt of Imam Abu Omar" ("Italian Supreme Court upholds conviction of 23 CIA agents," Ken Hanly, digitaljournal.com, Sept. 19, 2012).

The chance of President Obama handing over the CIA agents — convicted in absentia of violating the U.N. Convention Against Torture and Italian law — to Italy for imprisonment is as likely as his giving a national prime-time speech on the vital importance of the Constitution's separation of powers, which he has abandoned since moving into the White House.

In the meantime, however, none of those convicted CIA agents had better go to Italy as tourists, or they'll wind up behind bars.

I have been reporting for years on the American global network of torture, starting soon after 9/11 and now ignored by the Obama administration. As this series continues, I'll examine the extent of U.S. renditions covered in a Feb. 5 report by Open Society Justice Initiative called "Globalizing Torture," which documented 136 people "who reportedly were subjected to CIA secret detention and/or extraordinary rendition operations" in 54 countries complicit with the CIA.

What does President Obama have to say about these appalling "rendition operations?"

Well, as Amy Goodman at democracynow.org reported last September, when Obama was running in 2008, he sounded like then-President George W. Bush:

"We have to be clear and unequivocal: We do not torture. Period. ... That will be my position as president. That includes, by the way, renditions. We don't farm out torture. We don't subcontract torture" ("As Italy Sentences 23 CIA Agents in Rendition Case, Obama Refuses to Prosecute Anyone for Torture," democracynow.org, Sept. 21, 2012).

Then how come, under his presidency, no CIA agent or superior who oversaw renditions has been punished for what was clearly a crime in the United States and in the international treaties we have signed?

Because, as Obama has said, we must “look forward, not back.”

And furthermore, as the Open Society Justice Initiative wrote in its report, “the United States has still not repudiated the unlawful practice of extraordinary rendition.

“Indeed, President Obama’s January 2009 executive order directing the closure of CIA detention facilities did not apply to facilities used for short-term, transitory detention (defined by the CIA itself), and was ... crafted to preserve the CIA’s authority to detain terrorist suspects prior to rendering them to another country for interrogation or trial.”

Alfred W. McCoy, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of “Torture and Impunity: The U.S. Doctrine of Coercive Interrogation” (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), was blunt when he discussed the policy with Democracy Now’s Goodman:

“It’s right there in the footnote (regarding the preservation of CIA renditions). It’s in black and white, but nobody noticed it until The New York Times noted it a few months ago.”

When Goodman asked McCoy to explain how the United States is using “surrogates” like Somalia and Afghanistan to get intelligence through detainees, he said:

“We now know through the WikiLeaks that after the Abu Ghraib scandal, we reduced the number of detainees being held by U.S. forces in Iraq, and we transferred the detainees to Iraqi authorities, where the detainees were tortured. ... And we know that from 2004 to 2009, U.S. forces (who were commanded not to intervene) collected, I think, 1,365 reports of Iraqi human rights abuse about which they did nothing.

“In Afghanistan, it’s the same policy. Right after 2004, we started turning over the detainees that needed to be interrogated to the National Directorate of Security. In 2011, the United Nations investigated the Afghan National Security Directorate and found a systematic pattern of absolutely extraordinary human rights abuse, brutal physical tortures.

“And the United States continues to turn over detainees to the Afghan authorities. Britain and Canada will no longer turn them over, because of their concerns about human rights abuse.”

McCoy then highlighted the work of Jeremy Scahill, a reporter for The Nation whom I’ve previously written about. He told Goodman that Scahill “did a superb report and found that in Mogadishu, the Somali authorities operate, in their security directorate, a prison called ‘the Hole’ in the basement of their building. And the CIA engages (there).”

So under Obama, the CIA has not been deprived of its black sites.

McCoy summed up for Goodman one issue that was decidedly not on voters’ minds in our last presidential election:

“What’s happened under President Obama is we’ve gone back to that Cold War policy of outsourcing the abuse to our allies.”

Will any of you raise this issue in 2016?

Next week: We’re still doing more than a little of that abuse ourselves. And many of We The People still pride ourselves on being Americans. But some of our kids and grandkids are beginning to ask us what that really means.