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European inquiries into CIA actions widen

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VIENNA, Austria -- A CIA plane allegedly carrying suspected terrorist captives flew through Austria's airspace in 2003, the air force said Wednesday as the country joined a flurry of investigations stretching from Scandinavia to Spain.

Europe's top human rights watchdog, meanwhile, intensified its inquiry into alleged secret CIA detention centers and covert flights, with Council of Europe chief Terry Davis urging countries to provide full information on the issue.

Socialist lawmakers in the European Parliament urged the European Commission, the EU's head office, to urgently launch its own investigation.

"We cannot accept Guantanamo-like prisons in Europe," said Martine Roure, the Socialists' civil liberties coordinator. "We cannot accept that parts of Europe are not subject to the normal legal rules of detention and treatment. ... The best way to fight the fanatics and terrorists is not to adopt their methods but rather to stress our values of fundamental human rights."

Bulgarian officials Wednesday denied media reports that CIA aircraft allegedly landed at the Sarafovo airport near the Black Sea port of Burgas, and Portugal's Communist Party renewed its demand for the government to clarify similar reports.

Denmark said it would ask U.S. authorities for details about the alleged transport of detainees on planes said to be used by the CIA over Danish territory.

The Pentagon will not disclose what countries the U.S. military might fly over "or make brief refueling stops in during detainee movements ... (because) doing so would constitute a safety risk to both the detainees and our troops," said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Joe Carpenter.

In Austria, air force commander Maj. Gen. Erich Wolf told state radio that the flight in question -- a C-130 Hercules transport plane that took off from Frankfurt, Germany, and headed to Azerbaijan -- crossed Austrian airspace on Jan. 21, 2003.

Austria's army scrambled fighter jets to make contact with the plane's pilot but did not suspect anything wrong at the time, and the government lodged no diplomatic protests, Wolf said.

Since then, however, Austrian authorities have found reason to believe the flight was transporting captives, Wolf added.

Peter Pilz, an official in charge of security issues for Austria's Green Party, criticized the military's handling of the incident, contending that sending up the jets and taking no further action amounted to

providing an "honor escort" for the CIA plane.

Josef Cap, floor leader in parliament for the opposition Social Democratic Party, called for a meeting of Austria's national Security Council to determine whether the politically neutral nation's airspace was violated by CIA overflights.

There have been no indications that any landings occurred in Austria.

The flights have become an issue in many European countries amid reports that U.S. intelligence may have transported suspected al-Qaida members and others en route to secret prisons in Eastern Europe and other countries for interrogation.

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