By:Klaus Brill, John Goetz and Frederik Obermaier

From Media Channel I Original Article

Documents reveal how American intelligence officers turned a secret training center for Polish security forces into one of the controversial "black site" prisons for terrorism suspects.

STARE KIEJKUTY - The story begins on a wintery Thursday. On Dec. 5, 2002 at 2:56 p.m., a Gulfstream G-IV identified as N63MU lands at the tiny airport of Szczytno-Szymany in northeastern Poland. Its seven passengers get into a SUV with tinted windows and race off.

They drive 22 kilometers (13.7 miles) north, to some woods off rural road 58 near the village of Stare Kiejkuty – to a training center of the Polish secret service.

The center served as a CIA prison until the end of 2003. The seven passengers were presumably six CIA agents, and their first prisoner. More would soon follow.

Prisoners later reported that they had been interrogated and tortured. Today, nearly 10 years later, what happened in Stare Kiejkuty is putting the Polish government and justice system, as well as opposition leaders, in an awkward situtation. They are now facing accusations of acting anti-constitutionally by having tolerated the imprisonment and torture of prisoners in 2002 out of blind loyalty to the United States – and of trying to cover-up the fact.

The center in Stare Kiejkuty is about three hours north of Warsaw, the Polish capital, by car. Polish secret agents and soldiers have been trained here, behind dense rows of conifers and high barbed wire fencing, since the Cold War. The center has its own swimming pool, sports facilities, and shooting range. Satellite images also show a pier by the lake nearby.

To the east of the facility, there are two large country homes. They used to accommodate

high-ranking visitors but, according to documents in the possession of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, CIA agents were put up in one of the houses from the end of 2002 on while alleged Islamists were held prisoner in the other. This “Zone B” was apparently even off-bounds to Polish agents. The Americans referred to the area the Poles called the “Forest” as “Quartz” and it had a “Cosmic Top Secret” secrecy level.

After the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on Sept. 11, 2001, the CIA opened secret prisons around the world. They were the focal point of a secret program to abduct suspected terrorists. According to a new report by the American human rights organization Open Society Justice Initiative, at least 54 governments cooperated with the Americans on this.

Countries like Syria are said to have tortured prisoners at the request of the CIA, Germany is said to have given CIA planes fly-over and landing rights, and some countries even let the American intelligence service open secret prisons known as “Black Sites” on their sovereign territories. These countries are said to include Afghanistan, Thailand, Romania and Lithuania. When the facility in Thailand had to be closed down, the CIA apparently sought a replacement facility in Europe and found one in Poland.

Men bound, with their eyes covered

Between Dec. 5, 2002 and Sept. 22, 2003, according to a Council of Europe investigative report, at least seven planes landed in Szymany. The planes bore the identifications N63MU and N379P on their tail fins, and allegedly delivered between eight and 12 prisoners headed for Stare Kiejkuty. Airport employees later told Council of Europe investigators and Polish journalists that a few hours before landing, members of the Polish secret service or border police would call to announce the arrival of a plane.

Not long afterwards, vehicles with the tinted windows would drive up, uniformed personnel would seal off access to the airstrip, and a man would pay a landing fee between 8,000 and 12,000 zlotys (equivalent today to $2,712 to $4,069). That was four to six times as much as normal for this tiny airport, which was usually reserved for planes carrying tourists coming to the region to hunt or fish. All tower employees who weren’t needed in conjunction with the secret plane landings would be asked to leave the tower.

Generally a plane would land shortly afterwards, but didn't taxi to the terminal. Instead, it would stop at the end of the runway. Vehicles with tinted windows would speed down to the plane, where men – bound with their eyes covered and wearing earmuffs – would be loaded on. Then the planes would take off again, headed – according to official flight records – for Warsaw, Budapest in Hungary or Prague in the Czech Republic.

When the Washington Post revealed the existence of the secret CIA prisons in 2005 it did not mention Poland at the request of the U.S. government , which didn't want to upset its ally.

Poland's then president Aleksander Kwasniewski was unaware for a long time of what was going on in Stare Kiejkuty. According to Polish media, Kwasniewski was astonished when in 2003, visiting American president George W. Bush thanked him – he apparently didn't know that the Americans were running a prison in his country.

To this day Kwasniewski maintains that he didn't know that the Americans were illegally holding, and even torturing , alleged terrorists in Poland. When he found out about it, he supposedly demanded that the facility be closed and the CIA find someplace else. What is assumed to be the last prisoner flew out of Szczytno-Szymany on Sept. 22, 2003 on a Boeing 737. All those involved doubtlessly hoped that the episode was thus definitely over and that this dark chapter in U.S.-Polish relations would never come to light. They were wrong.

A letter from the International Red Cross to the CIA that mentioned a secret Polish prison and t orture
was leaked, and lawyers for two of the men suspected of being terrorists by the Americans, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri and Abu Zubaydah, filed suits against Poland.

The Council of Europe and several human rights organization then got involved, and then in 2008 the Polish justice system opened its own proceedings. At first this was in the hands of Warsaw's state prosecutor, but just when investigators were about to bring charges against the former head of the Polish secret service, Zbigniew Siemiatkowski, the matter was taken out of the Warsaw prosecutor's hands and – with no reasons given – turned over to the prosecutor in Krakow, Poland's second largest city.

When, a week ago, Krakow investigators asked for an open-ended extension, the European

Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg announced that it intended to declassify documents relating to the secret prison – which created considerable dismay in Warsaw, and had Justice Minister Jaroslaw Gowin talking about “a threat to Polish national security.”

Prime Minister Donald Tusk’s government, that inherited the affair, is not the only one under pressure, but also — and mainly — Social-Democratic opposition politician Leszek Miller who headed the Polish government from 2001 to 2004 and was in power when the Stare Kiejkuty prison was in operation. His signature is said to be on a document giving the U.S. government permission to run the facility, or at least so claims liberal Senator Jozef Pinior, a member of the governing Civic Platform (PO) party. He has long been campaigning for clarification with regard to the matter.

Leszek Miller continues to contest what several international investigations have long established, which is that during his time as Prime Minister there was a CIA prison in Poland. He has only bad things to say to say about Senator Pinior, whom he describes as a “scoundrel.”