

UNC legal team, rights advocates take up cause of tortured ex-prisoner

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Abou Elkassim Britel, an Italian citizen of Moroccan descent who was seized in Pakistan in 2002 and, according to reports, was transferred secretly by the CIA to Morocco, where he was imprisoned. Britel has testified he suffered torture throughout the ordeal. North Carolina human rights advocates and a University of North Carolina law class are pressing for an official apology to him.

WASHINGTON — North Carolina human rights advocates and a legal team from the University of North Carolina School of Law are pressing for an apology on behalf of a man who was tortured in Pakistani and Moroccan prisons over nine years, and, according to documents, secretly transported by the CIA on a North Carolina-based plane.

“I would like recognition of the injustice I went through,” Abou Elkassim Britel, an Italian of Moroccan descent who lives in Italy, said in an email Friday to McClatchy, written with his wife, Anna. “My honor and my dignity have been violated. I was deprived of family and freedom, or a future and career. I returned home after a 10-year exile with my health and mental state ruined, with no work and with much suffering.”

Britel said he wanted the apology as a public recognition of his wrongful suffering and to press the United States and other governments involved “to put an end to abuse and torture.”

Britel is one of more than 135 people whom the group Stop Torture Now, a grassroots coalition of activists, says survived extraordinary rendition, the CIA’s secret and controversial transport program to other countries, where they were imprisoned and tortured.

“An official acknowledgment of the abuse, and a meaningful apology, would have enormous benefits both for the survivors and for the international image of the U.S.,” said Christina Cowger, a North Carolina human rights advocate.

Britel has testified that he was captured and tortured by Pakistani forces in March 2002. He said he was interrogated by U.S. officials in Pakistan. He has said he was stripped, blindfolded and chained before being placed in a small plane, where he was forced to lie in one position and hit or kicked if he moved.

UNC law professor Deborah M. Weissman and seven students, in a petition to the United Nations rapporteur for torture, Juan E. Méndez, said that documents, including flight records, indicate that the plane was flown for the CIA by Aero Contractors from Pakistan to Morocco, where U.S. officials and contractors transferred him to Temara prison, where he was tortured.

The petition asked Méndez to “take the appropriate steps to urge the United States, Pakistan, Morocco and Italy to acknowledge the harm they have caused Mr. Britel and to offer him an apology and other means of repair and redress as may be appropriate.”

It said that in addition to the U.S., Pakistan and Morocco, Italy was at fault because its officials collaborated with the other three nations and “failed to adequately assist and protect him.” The brief also said that the state of North Carolina owed Britel restitution for hosting the airport that made the secret transport possible.

In his email, Britel said he had not received any communications or compensation from the U.S. government. He said he believed he had a right to compensation.

“For the last three years I live every day with the ghosts of my past, and never have received any form of apology or any display of humanity from those who have destroyed my life,” he said in his email. “From a legal point of view, I am a citizen with no criminal record, but this is not enough. What really needs to happen is that the public be told in the same loud voice as the depth of the damage that my family and I have been subjected to.”

He also said that the governments involved should be pressed as well, “in the hopes that it would bring an end to the abuse and torture.”

The CIA and the White House did not respond immediately to requests for comment.

The UNC legal team added a 130-page brief with the facts of the case and legal rationale for apologies. Their petition said that Britel was held in the Moroccan prison for eight months, cut off from his family. He was severely beaten all over his body, deprived of sleep and food and threatened with castration, sodomy and death. He was released in 2003, but arrested again before he could get travel documents to return to Italy.

The document said he could not withstand the torture and signed a document he had not read. He was convicted of acts related to starting an armed gang to prepare to commit terrorist acts, the document said.

The legal report said there was no evidence that he was involved in terrorist activities. It said he was imprisoned under inhumane circumstances until 2011, when he was pardoned.

The U.N.'s Méndez said on Friday that he had received the petition and was considering it, but that under the rules of the United Nations Human Rights Council he could not answer questions. Méndez said that after he gathered information he would submit his conclusions as part of a public annual report.

Weissman said she heard Cowger speak at a conference at the law school and asked if there was legal work that could help get more transparency in the cases of people who had been transported by the CIA through extraordinary rendition. Since then she has been involved in reports and other work on the issue.

She said Cowger was in touch with Britel and his wife in Bergamo, Italy, where they live.

"We learned he was suffering and could not get his life going," she said.

Seven students in a human rights policy seminar that Weissman teaches worked on petition during the 2014 spring semester. Weissman gave them high praise, saying they were "thoughtful, creative and impassioned" in their approach to the work.

The seven students were Hannah Choe, Natalie Deyneka, Kenneth Jennings, Caitlin McCartney, Stephanie Mellini, Jessica Ra and Cory Wolfe.

Stop Torture Now in June also started a petition on behalf of Britel. More than 500 people have signed, mostly in the U.S. and Italy.

The group, Reprieve U.S., an international human rights group, publicized a letter that Britel and nine other people who said they were victims of the CIA program sent to President Barack Obama in August. They asked him to make public the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the CIA's rendition program. They said they hoped their names would not be blacked out.

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