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IRISH EXAMINER.COM - 18 March 2008.

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Ahern rejects Shannon link to prisoner

15 March 2008

By Caroline O'Doherty

FOREIGN Affairs Minister Dermot Ahern has rejected concerns raised by human rights group, Amnesty International, that United States security forces brought a tortured prisoner through Shannon Airport.

An Amnesty investigation into the arrest, detention and torture of Khaled al Maqtari revealed that a plane used to transfer him between two of the prisons where he was kept during his two and a half year ordeal refuelled at Shannon the day before.

Executive director of Amnesty's Irish section Colm O'Gorman said it was also possible that Mr al Maqtari was already on board when the plane landed at Shannon in January 2004.

"We think there is a compelling case that he was on it," he said.

Either way, Mr O'Gorman said the fact that Shannon was used by an aircraft involved in the practice of "extraordinary rendition" went against international humanitarian law.

"What that [the investigation] specifically tells us is that Shannon Airport is at the very least being used as a staging post for these kind of missions by CIA-fronted operations and that Shannon in this case was used as a fuelling stop," he said.

Mr al Maqtari, a 31-year-old Saudi-born resident of Yemen, was arrested in the Iraqi city of Fallujah in January 2004 and was held for over a week in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison.

It was during his subsequent transfer to another prison in Afghanistan that the plane that stopped at Shannon was used. He was eventually released without charge late in 2006.

Mr Ahern said yesterday the Government was "totally opposed to the practice of extraordinary rendition", but had assurances from the US authorities that no prisoners had been transferred through Irish airports.

"The assurances are of a clear and categoric nature, relating to facts and circumstances within the full control of the US Government. They have been confirmed at the highest level, including by President Bush to the Taoiseach and by Secretary of State Rice to myself."

Mr O'Gorman said, however, that similar assurances had been given to the British authorities, but had been found to be false. He called for a proper inspection system to be put in place at Shannon to ensure planes were not carrying such prisoners or being used for rendition flights.

That call was backed by Labour leader Eamon Gilmore who said the US should have no objection to inspections if, as the assurances stated, they had nothing to hide from the Irish authorities.

Mr Gilmore said: "The failure to assert our right to check these planes leaves Ireland potentially complicit in the kidnap, detention and torture of people against whom no charges have been proven and who, in many cases, are totally innocent." [[FRONT PAGE](#)] [[BACK](#)]

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