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Italians Seeking Arrest of 3 CIA Agents

By ALESSANDRA RIZZO, Associated Press Writer
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Prosecutors said Wednesday they had arrested two Italian intelligence officers and were seeking four more Americans as part of an investigation into the alleged CIA kidnapping of an Egyptian cleric in Milan in 2003.

The arrest of the two SISMI intelligence officials was the first official acknowledgment that Italian agents were involved in a case that prosecutors have called a clear violation of Italian sovereignty.

In a statement released in Milan, prosecutors said three Americans being sought were CIA agents, while the fourth worked at the joint U.S.-Italian air base of Aviano, where the Egyptian was allegedly taken after his abduction.

The statement did not provide names, but said the two Italians, at the time of the kidnapping, were the director of SISMI's first division — dealing with international terrorism — and the head of the agency's operations in northern Italy.

Italian media reports identified the two as Marco Mancini, currently the head of military counterespionage, and Gustavo Pignero, and said they were charged with kidnapping.

Osama Moustafa Hassan Nasr, an Egyptian cleric and terrorist suspect also known as Abu Omar, was allegedly kidnapped from a Milan street on Feb. 17, 2003. Prosecutors say the operation represented a severe breach of Italian sovereignty that compromised their anti-terrorism efforts, and have already incriminated 22 purported CIA agents.

Prosecutors say Nasr was taken by the CIA to a joint U.S.-Italian air base, flown to Germany and then to Egypt, where he says he was tortured.

The operation was believed part of a CIA program known as "extraordinary rendition" in which terrorism suspects are transferred to third countries.

Prosecutors and a lawyer for Nasr say he is being held in a Cairo prison.

Italian media reports in recent months have said that Italian



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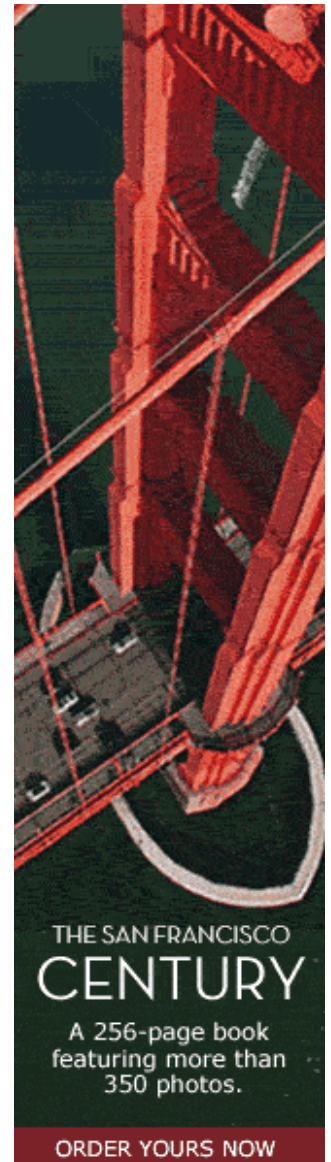
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intelligence officers were also involved.

But former Premier Silvio Berlusconi maintained his government and Italian secret services had not taken part in the operation or been informed. In March, SISMI director Nicolo Pollari told EU lawmakers that Italian agents had no knowledge of the operation.

Nasr is believed to have fought in Afghanistan and Bosnia and was under surveillance on suspicion of recruiting Islamic militants, according to Italian media reports.

Both SISMI and Milan prosecutor Armando Spataro, who has been leading the probe, declined comment.

Spataro is seeking the extradition of the 22 purported CIA agents accused in Nasr's abduction. The previous government led by Berlusconi decided against forwarding Spataro's extradition request to Washington, but Spataro has said he would ask the new center-left government led by Romano Prodi to make the request.

Also as part of the investigation, the Milan offices of an Italian daily, Libero, were searched Wednesday by about a dozen police, who seized the computer of the newspaper's deputy editor, Renato Farina.

Farina has covered the case, and the newspaper said police were looking for information they thought had been leaked by the SISMI to the journalist.

In Italy and across Europe, leftist politicians accused the Berlusconi government, a U.S. ally, of complicity with the CIA, while conservatives defended the officials involved and criticized prosecutors for hurting the fight against terrorism.

European investigator Dick Marty, a Swiss senator, reported to Europe's top human rights body last month that 14 European countries, including Italy, had aided the movement of detainees who said they were abducted by U.S. agents and secretly transferred to prisons around the world.

"Today's arrest leaves this complicity beyond doubt," said a statement from Cem Ozdemir and Raul Romeva, two Green members of the European Parliament. "This arrest is only the tip of the iceberg."

But Jas Gawronski, an Italian member of the European Parliament on a committee investigating CIA activities, condemned the move by prosecutors.

"Osama bin Laden is happy," said Gawronski, a former Berlusconi spokesman. "In my country today, instead of arresting terrorists we're arresting those who are hunting terrorists."

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