

By Jay Price

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SMITHFIELD, N.C. — With fresh ammunition from a University of North Carolina law school report, activists renewed their call Thursday for state officials to take legal action against Aero Contractors Ltd.

For years the Johnston County, N.C., air transport company, which has links to the CIA, has been accused of being a taxi service for paramilitary teams that pick up terrorism suspects in one country and fly them to another where it's easier to interrogate and, perhaps, torture them. The process is known as extraordinary rendition.

Law professor Deborah M. Weissman and members of the protest group North Carolina Stop Torture Now gave copies of their report to representatives of North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper and Gov. Bev. Perdue on Thursday morning, then released it during a news conference at the Johnston County Airport, where Aero is based.

The report does not accuse Aero employees of engaging directly in torture. Still, they are accountable for aiding and abetting violations of human rights that are protected under various international treaties and federal laws, Weissman said.

Because the U.S. government has signed those treaties, each state is legally obligated to uphold them, she said.

Also, according to a federal report to the United Nations, the state could prosecute any straightforward crimes involved, such as aggravated assault and kidnapping, even if they took place elsewhere, she said.

Several Aero officers listed in state corporation records either could not be reached or did not return calls Thursday. A woman who answered the company's phone said no one there would speak to a reporter.

Spokespeople for Cooper and Perdue said their offices would have to review the report before commenting on the contents.

Christina Cowger, one of the leaders of Stop Torture Now, said the state officials took the report seriously and that they had asked many questions.

After the news conference, Cowger said the state's obligation to do whatever it can to make it harder for Aero to do business was a legal and moral obligation.

"We'd like to start by just having them agree that torture is wrong," she said. "We've been working on this for more than six years, and they've never even said that."

Thursday's news conference was held near the tiny airport office. Aero officials were invited to attend, but declined, Cowger said.

In a way, though, the company's supporters may have gotten their say. Much of the news conference presentation was drowned out, first by planes that revved their engines nearby for several minutes, then by a sleek Pitts biplane that roared into the sky and promptly began a noisy aerobatics performance a few hundred feet above the gathering.

Since Aero's alleged role in the rendition program began to get attention in the mid-2000s, the little airport has become perhaps the world's main target for rendition protests. It's even put under occasional surveillance by volunteers trying to document movements of the company's aircraft.

Extraordinary renditions began under President Bill Clinton and accelerated under George W.

Bush after 9/11.

Former CIA officials have described them as an invaluable tool in the fight against terrorists. Opponents, though, say it has repeatedly led to violations of basic human rights, and that several innocent victims have been caught up in the program and tortured.

Stop Torture Now has tried for years to get state officials to act against Aero, but Cooper has declined to investigate the company's activities. There also were unsuccessful attempts in 2007 and 2008 in the General Assembly to formally ban torture in North Carolina.

Now, though, the activists feel the law school report gives new weight to their pleas for action.

Aero was founded in 1979 by Jim Rhyne of Clayton, N.C., who had overseen clandestine flights for Air America, an airline based in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era and run by the CIA.

Former CIA leaders said in earlier interviews with McClatchy Newspapers that the spy agency continued to employ Rhyne after Air America was disbanded. His role included setting up small companies to supply the CIA with aircraft and crews.

That is exactly what Aero has done, according to the UNC report, which was compiled by Weissman and eight students with the law school's Immigration and Human Rights Policy Clinic. It focuses on cases in which Aero aircraft were traced between airports on the days when five specific detainees were known to have been moved around, all of them later found innocent and released.

It bears formal endorsements from several experts on international human rights law, including Manfred Nowak, a professor at the University of Vienna in Austria who was appointed by the

United Nations to investigate torture from 2004 to 2010.

Four of the men mentioned in the UNC report were among a group that filed a civil suit in California against another company that was allegedly involved in the flight planning when they were rendered. Courts there dismissed the suit after the federal government stepped in and said vital national secrets were at stake.

An attorney for two of them, Steven Watt, was at the news conference Thursday and said North Carolina should act against Aero because it owed at least that to his clients, Abou Elkassim Britel and Mohamed Farag Ahmad Bashmilah, after their ordeal.

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