

By Tom Kington

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A retired CIA officer has been taken into custody in Portugal and faces extradition to Italy within days to serve a four-year sentence for her role in the 2003 kidnapping of a radical Muslim cleric.

Sabrina De Sousa, 61, was among 23 Americans convicted in absentia in 2009 for the kidnapping of Egyptian-born cleric Hassan Osama Nasr, known as Abu Omar, as he walked to a mosque in Milan, Italy, on Feb. 17, 2003. He was taken to Egypt and later said he was tortured. He was imprisoned until 2007.

The kidnapping occurred during the George W. Bush administration, when a practice known as extraordinary rendition was used. The practice, a counter-terrorism response to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, involved capturing terrorism suspects and handing them to other countries for interrogation and imprisonment.

“De Sousa was just following orders and she has since publicly criticized renditions,” her lawyer, Dario Bolognesi, said Wednesday. “She would be the first to see the inside of a jail for this and that would be so wrong — she is just a scapegoat.”

Many of the CIA operatives were using aliases and their identities are still unknown. The former CIA station chief in Milan, Robert Seldon Lady, was one of two senior officers who received pardons from Italian President Sergio Mattarella in 2015.

De Sousa, who retired in 2009, spoke out publicly against renditions, saying she had been a low level official in Italy with no direct role in the kidnapping.

She was arrested in October 2015 thanks to an outstanding European warrant when she flew to Portugal en route to visit her mother in India. Barred from traveling while awaiting extradition, she appealed through the Portuguese courts.

Her appeal was turned down and Monday she was taken to a women's prison to await her flight to Italy.

"The EU warrant said she would get a new trial in Italy, but that is not true — the Italian sentence is final," Bolognesi said.

Bolognesi said he would request that De Sousa be pardoned by Italy and hoped she would be spared jail while waiting for the response.

"We are also requesting that the four-year sentence be turned into a program of restricted movement, outside jail, involving social services work," he said.

Her lawyer in Portugal, Manuel Magalhaes Silva, said he expected extradition "within days."

Mark Toner, acting State Department spokesman, said U.S. officials have been following the matter closely.

"We are deeply disappointed in her conviction and sentence," Toner said. "We have asked our European counterparts what their next steps may be, but we are not in a position to detail those discussions."