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WikiLeaks cables: US worried about Catholic Workers

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

NCR Today

The acquittal of five Catholic Workers for a disarmament action at Ireland's Shannon Airport in 2003 was discussed in a secret U.S. cable, the latest release of documents from the international organization WikiLeaks shows.

The lengthy cable, sent to Washington in September 2006 by then-U.S. Ambassador to Ireland James C. Kenny, analyzes constraints on U.S. use of the airport imposed by the Irish government.

Kenny reports that while the Irish government supported continued U.S. transit at the airport, it had imposed restrictions on the transport of troops and war materiel, primarily in response to public criticism of U.S. actions in the Middle East.

Kenny writes: "Segments of the Irish public...see the airport as a symbol of Irish complicity in perceived U.S. wrongdoing in the Gulf/Middle East and in regard to extraordinary renditions, a view that underpinned a recent jury decision to acquit the 'Shannon Five' protesters who damaged a U.S. naval aircraft."

The "Shannon Five" referred to in the cable are members of the Catholic Worker movement who hammered on a U.S. naval aircraft refueling at Shannon in February 2003, the eve of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The Catholic Workers said they took inspiration from the prophet Isaiah's injunction to "beat swords into plowshares." Charged with two counts of criminal damage, the activists were unanimously acquitted in a Irish jury trial in July 2006.

The 'Shannon Five' acquittal, along with Ireland's overwhelming opposition to Israel's invasion of

Lebanon in the summer of 2006, was among the factors influencing the Irish government's decision to impose "cumbersome notification requirements" for U.S. transits at Shannon, Kenny believed. The conscientious ambassador requested guidance from Washington on how to handle the changing circumstances.

The Irish airport's strategic value to the U.S. is evident in Kenny's documentation of the high volume of military transits.

Roughly 340,000 U.S. troops passed through Shannon in 2005, 220,000 in the first nine months of 2006. These transits, Kenny notes, represent the Irish government's support for U.S. policy objectives in the Gulf/Middle East and were generating revenue for the airport.

In 2005, the airport earned a profit of 2.5 million euros from the military transits.

But the high volume of U.S. troops passing through Shannon Airport made it a symbol of Irish complicity in what Kenny calls "perceived US wrongdoing in the Gulf/Middle East." He reports that the recently acquitted "Shannon Five" were calling for a mass demonstration in Dublin as part of a campaign to "demilitarize" the airport.

"Although it is by no means clear that any protest will reach "mass" proportions, participation in the planned protest will likely draw from a vocal anti-war lobby that has demonstrated against the US use of Shannon from the start of the Iraq war up through the recent Lebanon conflict," Kenny writes.

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The cable goes on to discuss how Irish officials are navigating their quandary of accommodating the Americans and placating a restive public. Kenny describes the growing trend toward restrictions on U.S. use of the airport:

- In 2005, Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) denied a U.S. Department of Homeland Security transit through Shannon "out of apparent concern the public would misread the transit as a rendition."
- During the Lebanon conflict, the DFA forbade U.S. military transits to Israel. (In February 2006, the U.S. used Shannon Airport to ship Apache helicopters to and from Israel, eliciting sharp criticism from the Irish Parliament)
- Ireland's Department of Transport now considered all military equipment, including trucks and humvees, to be "munitions of war," requiring prior notification and clearance

Ireland's upcoming national elections complicated the situation, Kenny reports. He parses through the various political parties' positions on U.S. use of Shannon Airport and concludes by asking Washington for direction: Would the cumbersome restrictions make the airport no longer "a preferred transit stop"?

With regard to the "Shannon Five," the ambassador understood that the case, as a criminal matter, had run its course. But he wondered if the U.S. should pursue a civil suit, or at least, send an itemized bill to the Irish government for the aircraft's damage to convey American "dissatisfaction with the Shannon Five verdict."

The moral of this technical tale? The U.S. war machine is not as impenetrable as it appears.

To read the cable go here.

Catholic Worker Ciaron O'Reilly, a member of the 'Shannon Five,' requests that postcards and letters of support be sent to Private First Class, Bradley Manning.

Bradley Manning
c/o Courage to Resist
484 Lake Park Ave. #41
Oakland, CA 94610
USA

Manning is an imprisoned U.S. Army intelligence analyst accused of providing U.S. classified documents to Wikileaks. He is also accused of releasing the 'Collateral Murder' video, a U.S. military video which shows the indiscriminate slaying of over a dozen people in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad.

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