

Onyx (interception system)

Onyx is a Swiss intelligence gathering system maintained by the Federal Intelligence Service - Nachrichtendienst des Bundes (NDB). The costs of the system are not public, but the amount of 100 million Swiss francs has been mentioned several times,^[1] in particular in 2000 by Werner Marti, SP deputy to the National Council (Switzerland). In March 2005, journalist Urs Paul Engeler estimated that the costs (hidden in various military construction budgets) reached 400 million CHF.^[2] The Onyx system was launched in 2000, originally under the name SATOS-3 (the SATOS 1 and 2 systems were started in 1992, in particular to intercept faxes), and was completed in late 2005.



Onyx interception station in Leuk



Detail of Leuk interception station

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Purpose

The goal of the system is to monitor both civil and military communications, such as telephone, fax or Internet traffic, carried by satellite. Onyx uses lists of keywords to filter the intercepted content for information of interest, and the choice of keywords by the intelligence community must be approved by an independent commission. The system is not supposed to monitor internal communications; however, the monitoring of a communication between a person in Switzerland and someone in another country is allowed.^[3] The Swiss Federal Council has indicated that Onyx is not linked to other foreign systems such as ECHELON; according to the Council, the confusion and rumours about this issue are due to the sale by Swisscom to Verestar (now SES Americom) of the ground satellite communication station of Leuk (next to the Onyx site) in 2000.^[4] The use of the system is controlled by an independent control authority composed of members of the federal administration.^[5]

Active sites

Active sites include the following:^[3]

- Zimmerwald (Canton of Berne) 46°53′12.46″N 7°28′41.41″E
- Heimenschwand (part of the municipality of Buchholterberg, Canton of Berne) 46°49′52.81″N 7°42′57.99″E: 3 antennas.^[6]
- Leuk (Canton of Valais) 46°19′05″N 7°38′43″E: 4 antennas.^[7]

Intercepted black sites fax

On 8 January 2006, the Swiss newspaper *Sonntagsblick* (Sunday edition of the *Blick* newspaper) published a secret report produced by the Swiss government using data intercepted by Onyx.^{[8][9]} The report described a fax sent by the Egyptian department of Foreign Affairs to the Egyptian Embassy in London, and described the existence of secret detention facilities ("black sites") run by the CIA in Eastern Europe.^[10] The Swiss government did not officially confirm the existence of the report, but started a military judiciary procedure for leakage of secret documents against the newspaper on 9 January 2006. While the authenticity of the fax was implicitly confirmed during the trial, the reporter and newspaper were cleared of all charges on 17 April 2007.^{[9][11]}



Location of Onyx interception stations

Notes and references

- Valérie de Graffenried, *Onyx et ses «grandes oreilles»* (<http://www.letemps.ch/dossiers/dossiersarticle.asp?ID=171462>). *Le Temps*, 9 January 2006 (in French)
- Urs Paul Engeler, *Was sagen Sie jetzt?* (<http://www.weltwoche.ch/artikel/Default.asp?AssetID=10344>). *Weltwoche* 10/05, March 2005 (in German)
- Système d'interception des communications par satellite du Département fédéral de la défense, de la protection de la population et des sports (projet "Onyx") (<http://www.parlament.ch/f/print/ed-pa-gpd-onyx-d.pdf>). Report from the National Council (Parliament) on Onyx, 10 November 2003 (in French)
- Espionnage économique sur le territoire suisse au profit des Etats-Unis* (http://www.parlament.ch/f/suche/pages/geschaefte.aspx?gesch_id=20031046) Answer by the Swiss Federal Council to a question of Alexander Baumann, member of the National Council. 20 August 2003 (in French)
- Swiss Federal Department of Defense. *Projet ONYX réalisé : la Délégation des Commissions de gestion et l'Autorité de contrôle indépendante contrôlent sa conformité au droit* (<http://www.news-service.admin.ch/NSBSubscriber/message/fr/14419>). 6 September 2007 (in French).
- Swiss Federal Department of Defense, *Deux nouvelles antennes pour l'installation militaire de Heimenschwand* (http://www.admin.ch/cp/f/423981c6_1@fwsrvh.html). 17 March 2005 Press release (in French)
- Swiss Federal Department of Defense, *Deux nouvelles antennes sur le site du DDPS de Loèche* (http://www.admin.ch/cp/f/435ccb67_3@fwsrvh.html). 24 October 2005 Press release (in French)
- SonntagsBlick, *CIA-Skandal US-Folter-Camps: Der Beweis!* (<http://www.blick.ch/sonntagsblick/aktuell/artikel30413>) (in German) Accessed on 9 January 2006.
- Decision of the military tribunal (<http://www.vbs.admin.ch/internet/vbs/fr/home/documentation/oa009.parsys.0034.downloadList.00341.DownloadFile.tmp/urteilmg6062ciafaffaereanonymisiert.pdf>) of 17 April 2007 (in German). Includes the original article from the Sonntagsblick with the copy of the fax.
- Swissinfo, *Swiss may have known about secret CIA prisons* (<http://www.swissinfo.org/eng/swissinfo.html?siteSect=106&sid=6367478&cKey=1136749505000>). Accessed on 9 January 2006
- Swissinfo, *Reporters cleared of revealing military secret* (http://swissinfo.org/eng/search/detail/Reporters_cleared_of_revealing_military_secret.html?siteSect=881&sid=7725767&cKey=1176838959000). 17 April 2007

External links

- Swiss Federal Council. *Système d'interception des communications par satellite du Département fédéral de la défense, de la protection de la population et des sports (projet «Onyx») — Rapport de la Délégation des Commissions de gestion des Chambres fédérales du 10 novembre 2003 — Avis du Conseil fédéral* (<http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/ff/2004/2913.pdf>) 24 March 2004 (in French).
- Other photos of the Heimenschwand and Zimmerwald sites (<http://reseau.echelon.free.fr/reseau.echelon/photos/suisse.htm>)

Legal basis for the system

- Federal law on the army and the military administration / Bundesgesetz über die Armee und die Militärverwaltung (Militärgesetz, MG) / Loi fédérale sur l'armée et l'administration militaire (LAAM) of 1995-03-03, SR/RS 510.10 (E

(https://www.admin.ch/ch/e/rs/c510_10.html)-D (https://www.admin.ch/ch/d/sr/c510_10.html)-F (https://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/c510_10.html)-I (https://www.admin.ch/ch/i/rs/c510_10.html)), art. 99 (E (https://www.admin.ch/ch/e/rs/510_10/a99.html)-D (https://www.admin.ch/ch/d/sr/510_10/a99.html)-F (https://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/510_10/a99.html)-I (https://www.admin.ch/ch/i/rs/510_10/a99.html))

- Ordinance on electronic warfare / Verordnung über die elektronische Kriegführung (VEKF) / Ordonnance sur la guerre électronique (OGE) of 2003-10-15, SR/RS 510.292 (E (https://www.admin.ch/ch/e/rs/c510_292.html)-D (https://www.admin.ch/ch/d/sr/c510_292.html)-F (https://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/c510_292.html)-I (https://www.admin.ch/ch/i/rs/c510_292.html))

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