

Criminal probe into Merkel phone snooping

BERLIN, GERMANY: Germany's federal prosecutors have opened an investigation over alleged snooping on Chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone by the US National Security Agency (NSA).



Germany's Federal Prosecutor Harald Range has opened a criminal case to probe the tapping of Chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone. Image: Zimbio

The long-anticipated probe, which follows allegations last year that US spies had eaves-dropped on Merkel's mobile phone conversations, is against 'persons unknown' according to Chief Federal Prosecutor Harald Range said.

"I informed parliament's legal affairs committee that I have started a preliminary investigation over tapping of the Chancellor's mobile phone," he said after addressing the committee.

However, in a move that was condemned by opposition and Social Democrat lawmakers, he added that he had decided against opening an investigation into claims of wider NSA surveillance of German citizens.

The latest move may strain ties between Washington and its key European ally, Germany, which both countries' leaders have been at pains to restore following the

reports.

The claims embarrassed US President Barack Obama and led Merkel to comment that spying between friends is "just not done". Her spokesman declined to comment directly about the case saying the federal prosecutor had taken the decision "according to the letter of the law".

"The government had no right to influence, nor did it exert influence, in the discussion over whether to launch the probe," Steffen Seibert, Merkel's spokesman said.

Diplomatic channels

US State Department deputy spokesman Marie Harf said German concerns over the alleged US tapping of Merkel's cellphone were best dealt with through diplomatic channels.

Harf said she did not have any information on whether the United States would cooperate with the German federal prosecutors' investigation.

Data-sensitive Germans reacted with outrage to the accusations by fugitive intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, in a country where bitterness lingers about mass state spying on citizens by the Stasi secret police in former communist East Germany where Merkel grew up.

The decision to limit the probe to the allegation concerning Merkel's phone prompted criticism. "The main offence that is being discussed here, is the mass spying," said Greens party lawmaker Hans-Christian Stroebele.

After the investigation by the federal prosecutor is finished, Range must still decide whether to bring charges, for example against the head of the NSA at the time of any alleged incident.

Berlin set up a parliamentary panel in April to assess the extent of spying by the NSA and its partners on German citizens



Chancellor Angela Merkel hasn't commented about the criminal probe. Image: Wikipedia

and politicians, and whether German intelligence aided its activities.

It has decided it wants to question Snowden, regarded as a traitor by the US administration and subject to an arrest warrant, perhaps via video link or by sending an envoy to Russia where he has been given temporary asylum.

Obama sought to quell the international furore over the reports of NSA activities, announcing in January he had halted spy taps on friendly world leaders and curtailed the reach of mass NSA phone surveillance.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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