

German Guantanamo victim accuses government

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Ex-Interior Minister Takes Political Responsibility for Kurnaz Case

Kurnaz accuses the German government of turning down an offer to release him from Guantanamo Bay in 2002: Germany's former interior minister Otto Schily has said he was "politically responsible" for the case of a German-born Turk who languished in Guantanamo Bay for nearly five years before being released without charge.

Schily, who was interior minister under the Social Democratic-Green party coalition headed by Gerhard Schröder, told a parliamentary investigative committee on Thursday that he was responsible for all "actions and omissions" of the ministry in its handling of the Murat Kurnaz case.

Schily said there was no doubt that the Interior Ministry -- and not the Chancellery or the Foreign Ministry -- had "the core responsibility for the valuation of security cases."

Otto Schily defended the former government's handling of the Kurnaz case
Bildunterschrift: Großansicht des Bildes mit der Bildunterschrift: Otto Schily defended the former government's handling of the Kurnaz case

Schily took some of the pressure of German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who was Schröder's chief of staff at the time of Kurnaz's imprisonment.

"Steinmeier had to rely on the proper, careful analysis of the facts carried out by the Interior Ministry and the intelligence services," Schily said, adding that the government's conduct had been "perfectly correct."

No charges against Kurnaz

Kurnaz was arrested in Pakistan just weeks after the September 11, 2001, attacks and handed over to US authorities. He eventually landed in the US detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where he says he was tortured until his release in August 2006.

The BND secret service parliamentary investigative committee is looking at whether the former government turned down an offer to release Kurnaz in 2002 after US officials found he posed no danger -- as is claimed by Kurnaz.

Schily said the former government made the decision not to let Kurnaz travel back into Germany because he was a security risk.

"He might have been misguided by people around him, but he wasn't harmless," Schily said.

He added there were indications that when Kurnaz was arrested in 2001, he was actually on his way to train as a terrorist in Afghanistan. Schily said it was the duty of the secret service to do everything possible to avert the danger of terrorism.

He also said the government had supported Kurnaz' repatriation to Turkey. But at the same time, Schily said, he wasn't aware of an offer from the USA in 2002 to set Kurnaz free.

Criticism of the US

The former interior minister also stressed that the responsibility for Guantanamo lied firmly with the United States. Criticism, therefore, had to be directed at the US government and not at the German government, he said.

The US has been heavily criticized for its handing of inmates at Guantanamo
Bildunterschrift: Großansicht des Bildes mit der Bildunterschrift: The US has been heavily criticized for its handing of inmates at Guantanamo

"The American's responsibility is clear," Schily told the committee. "I won't allow the blame for what happened in Guantanamo to be laid at the door of the (Social Democratic-Green) government," Schily said.

Kurnaz was eventually freed after Chancellor Angela Merkel came to power due to a lack of proof that he belonged to a terrorist group. He lives in the northern German city of Bremen.

Steinmeier faces questioning

Steinmeier is to speak before the committee later on Thursday afternoon, in his second appearance before the investigative committee.

Murat Kurnaz was released after the intervention of current Chancellor Angela Merkel
Bildunterschrift: Großansicht des Bildes mit der Bildunterschrift: Murat Kurnaz was released after the intervention of current Chancellor Angela Merkel

Free Democratic Party chairman Max Stadler, who heads the BND committee, has accused Steinmeier of contradictory behavior. Stadler said he wants Steinmeier to explain why he was actively against the return of Kurnaz while chief of staff, but then pushed for his release as foreign minister.

The human rights organization Amnesty International (ai) said the former Social Democratic-Green government had a "clear co-responsibility" for Kurnaz' lengthy detention.

"The government didn't push for the early release of Kurnaz from his nearly five-years of degrading detention even though he wasn't proven guilty," the head of ai's German branch, Barbara Lochbihler said.

The German government should pay Kurnaz damages because it was responsible for delaying the man's release, the United Nation's special investigator on torture, Manfred Nowak, told German broadcaster Bayerische Runkfunk.

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