

Bush in Germany

Chancellor Merkel joins with Bush in backing Israeli aggression

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At a press conference in Germany Thursday, Chancellor Angela Merkel lined up behind US President George Bush in supporting Israel's expanding war of attrition in the Middle East. On the same day that Israeli fighter planes bombed Lebanon's main airport, Bush and Merkel stood shoulder to shoulder to declare their solidarity with Israel, which, according to Bush, "had every right to defend itself." The press conference was held after a morning of talks between the two leaders.

Bush is visiting the eastern German region of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in a two-day stopover on his way to the G8 summit of world leaders being held in St. Petersburg this weekend. Bush had been invited to Germany some months ago by Merkel, who has made two trips to Washington since taking over as chancellor at the end of last year. Although Merkel was born in West Germany, she grew up in East Germany prior to reunification, and the region is her parliamentary constituency.

As with all of Bush's trips abroad, a massive security force has been deployed in Heiligendamm, a sleepy tourist resort on the Baltic coast. The immediate area surrounding his luxury hotel has been turned into a veritable fortress. The two-day visit by the US president has precipitated the largest police and military operation in the region's post-war history. The area has been swelled over the past week by a total of 15,000 police and soldiers.

A 1.3-kilometer barbed wire fence has been erected around Bush's hotel, and fighter jets will continuously patrol the Baltic skies until he leaves. No ships are allowed to sail within a 50-square-mile area of the Baltic Sea.

Although Bush was ferried by helicopter from the local airport to his hotel and was flown by helicopter to the nearby village of Trinwillershagen for a dinner Thursday evening, 400 kilometers of surrounding motorway have been closed to traffic. Residents in the region, currently sweltering under a heat wave, have been instructed not to open their windows.

On Thursday, Bush made a short "walkabout" and met with a heavily vetted group of German citizens. At least one third of the total in the crowd were reportedly US and German special agents in civilian guise.

The head of the police operation justified the huge operation, which will cost an estimated 13 million euros, with the remark that "the American president was the most endangered person in the world."

The area Bush is visiting is overwhelmingly dependent on tourism, but like the entire region has suffered bitterly in the period since the capitalist reunification of Germany in 1990. Unemployment averages 23 percent. Many local residents, forced to live on a pittance in the form of unemployment benefits, are outraged at the expenditure for Bush's stopover.

Despite the huge police-military presence, some 1,000 demonstrators sought to make clear to the American president that he was not welcome. The protesters were kept well away, however, from the presidential entourage. Opposition to the Bush visit has reached into the ranks of the regional government of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, which consists of a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism.

While the prime minister of the state, Harald Ringstorff (SPD), was part of the delegation which

greeted Bush at the airport Wednesday evening, he turned down an invitation to the dinner on Thursday. With state elections approaching, Ringstorff was evidently anxious not to associate himself too closely with the US president. Leading members of the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism took part in the protest demonstration against the Bush visit.

The overwhelming majority of the German population is vehemently opposed to the Bush administration and its policies of war and social reaction. A number of German newspapers have run editorials warning of the American president's "smile offensive," and the widely read *Sddeutsche Zeitung* commented as follows:

"America has changed fundamentally since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Anyone who lived in the States prior to that date knows how great the changes are between then and now. Civil rights and individual freedoms have been pushed into the background on the basis of a struggle against terrorism which apparently justifies anything. It may well be that, as the national anthem says, the US is the home of the brave. But Bush has put fetters on the land of the free.

"In Germany, on the other hand, there has never been an American president who has been opposed so energetically and by such a large majority. This has nothing to do with the alleged growth of anti-Americanism... Bush as a person is so strongly rejected in Germany because he embodies this war, the lies prior to the war, the suffering caused by the continuation of the war, the violations of law and the mistakes made during the war."

Since coming to power, Chancellor Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union has at times raised issues in connection with Iraq. In particular, she has voiced muted criticisms of the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay. On this occasion, however, while much was said about international politics, neither Merkel nor Bush devoted a single word to Iraq.

At their joint press conference Thursday, Bush and Merkel expressed agreement on every point which had been raised in their morning discussions. Their statements to the press and answers to a handful of questions from journalists were dominated by two issues: Iran and Israel.

Merkel was first to speak and declared that Germany and the US had reached agreement on a joint approach

towards Iran, which had been formulated over the previous few days at a meeting of international foreign ministers. Merkel made it clear that she would fully back Bush at the weekend G8 summit in pressuring Russian President Vladimir Putin to accept the resolution, which is to be put to the United Nations Security Council.

Merkel then raised the issue of the intensified fighting in the Gaza Strip and laid the entire blame for the Israeli invasion of Gaza and the expansion of its aggression into Lebanon on the Palestinians. The main issue, she said, was for Palestinian and Lebanese militants to return their captured prisoners and cease rocket attacks on Israel.

Again, at the end of her remarks, she emphasized the broad range of agreement between herself and the American president on a number of issues, including energy policy and military intervention in Africa. Germany recently sent a contingent of German troops to the Congo.

Bush came to Germany hoping to find a reliable international ally in the figure of the German chancellor. For her part, Merkel has made it clear that she is prepared to take up the offer. Also on board is the Social Democratic Party, which participates in her grand coalition government. There can be no doubt that that Merkel's support for Bush's policy in the Middle East and Iran was scripted for her by her Social Democratic foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who also served under former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.



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