

Germany: Nine Turkish immigrants die in house fire

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Less than one day after nine Turkish immigrants died in a house fire in Ludwigshafen, Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chairman Kurt Beck claimed there were no indications that the blaze was the result of a racist attack. On Thursday, February 7, Beck, who is also state premier of Rhineland Palatinate where Ludwigshafen is situated, defended his claim, saying it was supported by what was known so far from the investigation.

The fire in the four-storey building broke out just after 4 o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday, February 2. Although it was the middle of the day, and the fire brigade arrived at the scene after just a few minutes, it was too late to save five children and four adults, including a pregnant woman. Sixty others were also injured. In addition to the 52 inhabitants of the house, a number of visitors were in the building watching a passing carnival.

The fire spread via the wooden stairway, quickly reaching all floors, cutting off any retreat for those in the old building. A horrific scene then unfolded at the front of the building; with whole families pushing forward on the balconies, some jumping through windows because there was no escape route. An 11-month-old baby, thrown from the third floor into the arms of a policeman, was caught without sustaining any injuries.

When Beck visited the scene the following day, and claimed that there was no indication racism had played a role in the tragedy, the investigation had not even started, since the burnt-out building was closed off because of the danger of collapse. But anyone who has followed developments in Germany in recent years would recognise that—based on the exceptionally rapid spread of the fire—there were also grounds for suspecting a racially motivated arson attack. The building was inhabited exclusively by families of Turkish origin. On the ground floor, a Turkish voluntary group operated a café named “Kale” (castle)—a meeting place for many people of Turkish origin who lived in the neighbourhood.

The Turkish media immediately drew comparisons to the 1993 fire in Solingen, in which five Turkish women and girls were burned to death when neo-Nazis set fire to the building where they lived. That arson attack had been preceded by a witch-hunt of asylum-seekers, which culminated in the virtual abolition of the right to asylum. The xenophobic campaign had encouraged the perpetrators of the Solingen atrocity.

During the recent elections in Hesse, the campaign against “criminal foreigners” conducted by state premier Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) has had a similar effect. Many of the 2.5 million people of Turkish origin living in Germany felt they were being attacked and defamed by Koch's campaign, which was supported by Chancellor Angela Merkel. According to immigration researcher Haci-Halil Uslucan, feelings were very heated as a result of the “strongly polarised election campaign.”

Quoting Faruk Sen of the Centre for Turkish Studies, the newspaper *Zaman* reported that last year's passage of new immigration laws by Germany's grand coalition government of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats had left many Turkish immigrants feeling they faced intensified discrimination. Under the new legislation, relatives of Turkish immigrants can only come to join their family in Germany if they can demonstrate sufficient knowledge of German. Immigrants from the US, Japan, Israel and other countries, *Zaman* noted, do not face such rules.

Federal Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) has instead blamed the Turkish press for the outpouring of distrust and anger on the part of many Turkish immigrants following the tragedy in Ludwigshafen. He called their reports about a possible racist background to the fire “groundless speculation.” The insecurity people felt, Schäuble told TV news programme *Heute Journal*, shows “how irresponsible some of the media in Turkey has

been.”

Schäuble then insulted Turkey’s ambassador to Berlin, Mehmet Irtemcelik, with the words: “Sometimes, one must even teach ambassadors manners.” Irtemcelik had called it “strange” that German politicians—meaning Kurt Beck—had excluded any racist background to the fire disaster before the possible causes had even been examined.

Schäuble, who was in Turkey at the time of the fire, agreed to the Turkish government’s request to send its own experts to investigate the Ludwigshafen fire, while at the same time accusing Turkey of showing “distrust in relation to our police authorities.”

The Christian Democratic parliamentary faction vice chair, Wolfgang Bosbach, described the headlines in the Turkish media as “intolerable.” He said he had no objections to Turkish investigators wanting to draw up their own picture of the situation locally, “but it must be clear: In Germany, it is the German authorities who investigate matters. Their Turkish colleagues have observer status, but nothing more.”

Complaints also came from the police trade union and the SPD. SPD parliamentary deputy Lale Akgün, who has lived in Germany for 45 years, said that the presence of Turkish observers was “at the cost of the confidence in the German police.”

Finally, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan travelled to Ludwigshafen to calm the situation and show support for the German government. Speaking at the scene of the fire, he called for calm, praised the great dedication of the German police and affirmed German-Turkish friendship. Erdogan, who is seeking Turkish membership in the European Union, is interested in maintaining good relations with the German government.

The actual cause of the fire is still unknown. Authorities investigating the blaze were only able to begin their investigation in the nearly completely burned-out building on Wednesday, February 6. But indications are growing that the fire could very well be due to a racist arson attack.

According to statements by two young girls, a man with black hair, who spoke German, “ignited a little stick with a pocket lighter and then threw it beside a pram in the corridor.” The police are presently trying to produce a composite sketch of the possible arsonist with the use of Identi-Kit software. This will depend, however, on how well the eight- and nine-year-old girls recover, since both have been traumatised by the fire.

Bayram Türkoglu, a leading regional figure in the Turkish community, has told the press that three days

before the fire, one of the families living in the building received a threatening call saying, “It’s your turn now.”

Like many hundreds of others, Türkoglu came on Wednesday to the scene of the disaster in order to express his condolences and demonstrate solidarity with the families of the nine victims. Many laid flowers, hanging Turkish flags on the fence. Each day, hundreds still come to show their sympathy.

According to the Turkish newspaper *Zaman*, citing relatives of the victims in Gaziantep in southeast Turkey, the family of the building’s owner had been threatened by young German right-wing extremists. However, the family did not take the threats seriously.

The police in Ludwigshafen claim they know nothing about such threats, and there is a great deal of speculation. However, the police have confirmed that in the mid-1990s, there had been a bar in the building whose patrons belonged to “the right-wing spectrum.” Some newspapers have run reports about it being a skinhead meeting place. In the following years, various other individuals and predominantly Turkish cultural associations rented out the ground floor.

According to the police, in August 2006, Molotov cocktails were thrown into the building, without any culprits ever being caught. In addition, the word “hate” (“Hass” in German) has been painted twice on the outside wall—with the last two letters written in runic form, as used by Hitler’s notorious Waffen SS. According to the police, the graffiti has been there for some time.

The police have also confirmed that anti-Turkish graffiti exists on a building near the scene of the fire, which has been reported in several Turkish newspapers. But police said it was from “more than a year ago.”



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