

German government crisis over Kunduz massacre

Ulrich Rippert
30 November 2009

Former Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) resigned at the end of last week from his present government post as employment minister. He has thereby paid the price for the lies used to hush up the Kunduz massacre at the beginning of September in which up to 142 people lost their lives, including numerous civilians. Also dismissed the previous day for the same reason were General Inspector Wolfgang Schneiderhan, the most senior military figure, and State Secretary Peter Wichert.

These resignations must be seen within a larger political context. First of all, the defence minister, the military leadership and senior civil servants at the defence ministry were not solely responsible for the dissemination of false information about the circumstances surrounding the bombing of two petrol tankers and the ensuing civilian casualties. The entire government has tried to pull the wool over the eyes of the German public.

Secondly, the government was only able to do this because the opposition parties in parliament, above all the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, have unreservedly supported Germany's participation in the Afghanistan war. And thirdly, the events have been used to prepare and legitimise a drastic expansion of the war and a large-scale military offensive.

On the basis of the facts, the following picture emerges: In the early morning of September 4, only a few hours after the commander of the provincial reconstruction team in Kunduz, Colonel Georg Klein, called in an air strike on two gasoline-filled tankers that had been kidnapped, it was already well known that it was mainly civilians who had died.

The next day, an interview was broadcast with an Afghan doctor who had treated the wounded in a nearby hospital and confirmed the victims included

children. Two days later, the commander of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), US General Stanley McChrystal, visited the scene. A journalist accompanying him then published an article in the *Washington Post* providing numerous details about the extent of the massacre.

On September 7, NATO's first interim report about the incident was received in Berlin, in which the German Armed Forces were heavily implicated. The existence of this report was denied for four days by the German defence ministry and cabinet members.

On September 8, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) delivered a government statement to the Bundestag (parliament). She did not call for the circumstances surrounding the incident to be thoroughly investigated, but offered her support to the defence minister. With a sharpness not previously seen, she defended the actions of the army and rebuffed all criticism and any "prejudgement" of the armed forces. Merkel threatened openly: "I will not tolerate that from anyone, either at home or abroad."

The chancellor's present claim that she had been insufficiently informed by the then-defence minister is just as spurious as her statement at the time that no criticism could be raised about the actions of the German Armed Forces. Her government statement was directed against the media reports, the truth of which has meanwhile been confirmed.

Britain's *Guardian* newspaper wrote at the time that the order for the bombardment had led to Germany's "deadliest military operation since the end of the Second World War." Merkel's aggressive appearance in parliament was an attempt to intimidate any critical reporting of Germany's war mission in Afghanistan and clearly smacks of censorship.

In resigning, Jung, Schneiderhan and Wichert are

playing the role of fall guys. Their departure is meant to take the heat off a chancellor who has defended the greatest war crime committed by the German army since Hitler's Nazi regime ruled in Berlin.

Chancellor Merkel has been and is able to rely on the fact that no party in parliament dares to oppose the war policy. When the SPD and the Greens formed the government (1998-2005), they drastically expanded the international missions of the German Armed Forces, despatching the army to Afghanistan. Since then, they have vehemently defended the military deployment into the Hindu Kush, criticising Merkel from the right.

For example, in a debate last week, the chair of the parliamentary defence committee, Susanne Kastner (SPD), deplored the fact that the "affair about the air strike last September and the civilian victims" had sapped the commitment of Germany's soldiers in Afghanistan. The SPD parliamentary deputy said, "This is an additional burden for the soldiers and for all German Armed Forces members." Jung and his delivery of bad information had contributed to the fact that "acceptance for the deployment had diminished in the population."

The Left Party plays a particularly sordid role in the present debate about the war. While their parliamentary deputies criticise the Afghanistan operation, the party constantly signals that it will do nothing to cause difficulties for the government on this issue. Instead, it indicates that should it be invited to participate in government, it too could swing behind the administration on this matter.

The party has three members on the parliamentary defence committee who were informed in mid-October about the contents of the confidential NATO report on the Kunduz massacre. None of the three Left Party deputies was prepared to take up the criticisms contained in the report and to challenge the defence ministry and the government.

They left it to right-wing circles to pass on this and other information to *Bild-Zeitung*. The new defence minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, is now using these exposures in order to push through personnel changes, preparing the army leadership and government for a drastic expansion of the Afghanistan war. General Inspector Wolfgang Schneiderhan had taken up his post under the SPD-Green Party government in 2002. His resignation now provides Guttenberg with the

possibility of filling this top army position with a man of his choosing.

Defence Minister Guttenberg is leaving no doubt about the fact that he wants to use the present dispute in order to strengthen the influence of the army. In his inaugural visit to Washington last week, he assured the US administration of his full support for an expansion of the Afghanistan war. Germany was ready to bear "more of the burden," Guttenberg told his hosts. Moreover, he would ensure that German participation in the war meets with better public acceptance. The German Armed Forces are presently engaged with their own units in 10 operations worldwide. It has become an army of active deployment, he stressed, adding that the significance of its foreign missions would increase.

Guttenberg considers it necessary to put an end to the previous excuses and to plainly elaborate Berlin's war aims. He summarised his view with the words: "What today is an exceptional case, must become a matter of course."



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