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Minister denies Germans complicit in U.S. rendition

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By Kerstin Gehmlich

BERLIN (Reuters) - Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier denied on Thursday Berlin had advance knowledge of a 2001 U.S. operation to seize a German citizen in Morocco and transfer him to Syria where he was allegedly tortured.

Steinmeier was testifying before a special parliamentary committee set up to investigate German cooperation with the U.S. "war on terror", particularly its knowledge of secret CIA transfers of terror suspects known as "renditions".

Thursday's hearing focused on the case of Mohammad al-Zammar, a Syrian born man with German citizenship who had links to the Hamburg al Qaeda cell that led the Sept 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

German authorities questioned Zammar after the attacks and released him. Shortly thereafter, he traveled from Germany to Morocco, where he was arrested. A Council of Europe report said he was then flown to Syria on a CIA-linked aircraft.

Steinmeier, now the top Social Democrat (SPD) in Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition government, was chief of staff to then-Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and responsible for coordinating intelligence matters at the time.

Any sign that Steinmeier knew more about CIA rendition flights than he has previously acknowledged would do serious damage to him and the SPD, which is already reeling from a public debate over whether to cooperate with a far-left party.

Steinmeier described allegations by the media and some parliamentarians that Germany passively accepted CIA kidnappings of its own citizens as "pure nonsense".

"In November 2001, there was no Guantanamo and neither was there information about ... kidnappings and so-called renditions by U.S. secret services," Steinmeier told the committee.

"None of us could therefore have imagined that ... the United States could take Mr. Zammar 'out of traffic' in Morocco."

Zammar was sentenced by a Syrian court last year to 12 years in prison. His lawyer has said he is a religious man who had the misfortune of frequenting the same mosques as the planners of the September 11 attacks.

Steinmeier defended sending German officials to a Syrian prison to interrogate Zammar before his sentencing, saying they had a duty to question him to seek information on possible security threats to Germany.

Human rights groups had said he was being tortured in the prison, but the German interrogators reported no evidence of that, Steinmeier said.

Steinmeier appeared before the committee last year about a German-born Turk, Murat Kurnaz, who was arrested in Pakistan three weeks after the Sept 11 attacks and handed over to U.S. authorities.

At the time, Steinmeier denied widespread media allegations that he had turned down a U.S. offer to release Kurnaz from the U.S. Guantanamo Bay prison for terror suspects in October 2002.

(Editing by Noah Barkin and Mary Gabriel)

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