

Germany pressed to arrest CIA agents

By Hugh Williamson in Berlin

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German authorities were under mounting pressure on Thursday night to issue arrest warrants for US agents working for the CIA who allegedly kidnapped and detained a German national for four months in 2004.

August Stern, a Munich-based prosecutor, confirmed that he had received a list of about 20 names of people believed to have been involved in the kidnapping in Macedonia in December 2003 of Khaled el-Masri, a Lebanese-born German, who was held in a US-run prison in Afghanistan until May 2004.

The kidnapping of Mr Masri sparked outrage in Germany last year, leading to tensions in US-German relations and the formation of a parliamentary inquiry earlier this year. Mr Stern's comments followed German media reports that at least three of the alleged kidnapers had been identified as pilots living in North Carolina and employed by Aero Contractors, a company linked to the CIA.

The men – using the aliases Eric Fain, James Fairing and Kirk James Bird – had been among a group of 13 alleged CIA agents who are claimed to have stayed in a hotel in Mallorca on their way to Macedonia in late 2003, according to an investigation by the ARD, Germany's main public television channel. ARD in recent weeks claimed to have located the men and asked for statements, but were turned down.

Passport copies and other information about the men were obtained in 2004 by Spanish police, but have only recently been requested and received by German investigators. Mr Stern insisted on Thursday that his investigation still needed more time before arrests warrants could be issued.

Opposition politicians on Thursday attacked the delays, and called on the German government to take action to help track down the alleged kidnapers. Max Stadler of the liberal Free Democrats said: "Concerning these secret CIA flights, we must not give the impression that Germany is not interested in a full investigation."

In contrast to Germany, an alleged CIA abduction in Italy has led to the issuing of arrest warrants against 22 CIA agents.

In a fresh embarrassing twist for Berlin, a senior police official on Thursday told the parliamentary inquiry on Mr Masri's case that the latter had been shadowed by German investigators in Germany in the months before he was kidnapped, and information was passed to the US. Germany has said repeatedly that it had no involvement in Mr Masri's seizure. Government officials refused to comment on Thursday.

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