

Report From Germany by Rainer Apel

Latest Incident Aimed at Anti-War Policy

Former Economics Minister Jürgen Möllemann's death in a parachute incident poses questions.

On June 5, news broke that Jürgen Möllemann had died in a parachute jump near the North Rhine-Westphalia city of Marl. According to accounts by others who jumped with him, his main parachute opened, but after several seconds it came off; Möllemann seemed unable to open his reserve parachute, nor did its automatic activator work. Because he had trained as parachutist in the Bundeswehr and was an experienced sports jumper, the incident left no doubt that something awful had happened. An accident? Sabotage? Suicide?

Most media initially went with the "suicide" story, in part because that morning police had begun a search of Möllemann's offices and home, as part of an investigation of alleged embezzlement and tax evasion; only minutes earlier a Bundestag commission had voted to lift his parliamentary immunity as a deputy. Möllemann had been informed about these developments shortly before he boarded the plane for his jump.

Many, if not most in Germany had difficulties buying that story. After all, Möllemann had been the target of a vicious media campaign for more than a year, for his opposition to the policy of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Palestine, and to the war drive of the Bush Administration chicken-hawks after Sept. 11, 2001. When that campaign, including allegations that Möllemann was "anti-Semitic," did not silence him, another was launched, around the funding of a million-run anti-Sharon leaflet which he had circulated during the national election campaign in September 2002. The executive of Möllemann's party, the Free

Democrats (FDP), did not want to say anything against Sharon or Bush, so Möllemann funded it through other sources, including his own money.

None of the charges have ever been proven: for example, that through his chairmanship of the German-Arab Society, he might have used money from Saudi Arabia or Abu Dhabi for the leaflets. Nor were the charges of tax evasion. But the FDP party executive first forced Möllemann out of his post as national vice-chairman, then from the FDP group in the Bundestag and from the party.

There has been only one precedent for such a massive campaign in post-war German history—the media witch-hunt against Uwe Barschel, the former Christian Democratic Union governor of Schleswig-Holstein, who was found dead in a Geneva hotel room on Oct. 10, 1987. The initial story about Barschel's alleged suicide, amid charges of murky financial and political deals, soon collapsed, as more and more details became known about the strange circumstances of his death and the disappearance of crucial forensic evidence. The inconclusive official investigation into his death has been shut down for years, but many believe he was killed by circles who ran the illegal East-West arms and drugs trade, into whose dealings he had gained some insight. Barschel had intended to testify before a parliamentary investigative committee—two days after his death.

Several media began likening the Barschel and Möllemann cases on June 6, including the line that the "full truth will never be found out." But this time, prominent politicians voiced

doubts about a suicide. Former Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, under whose auspices Möllemann made his political career, said that he had known Möllemann as an energetic politician who would never commit suicide. Genscher's statement was highly unusual. Likewise, Wolfgang Kubicki and Rainer Brüderle, the FDP state chairmen in Schleswig-Holstein and Rhineland-Palatinate, voiced their doubts. Kubicki reported that he had been on the phone with Möllemann two hours before the incident and saw no evidence whatsoever of an allegedly "depressed" or "suicidal" man. Möllemann's legal situation had been improving, Kubicki said, and they had arranged to meet the week after.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder stated in Berlin hours after Möllemann's death that although they had often disagreed, he had always "esteemed him as a discussion partner." In an obituary, Schröder said that Möllemann's merits as a former member of government will "always be remembered." Möllemann, chairman of the German-Arab Society for 22 years, had regularly been consulted by Schröder about the Arab world. It is said that these consultations contributed to strengthening the government's firm "No" to the Iraq War.

Parenthetically, Möllemann was never an "anti-Semite." He supported Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's peace process before the latter's assassination in 1995, but he opposed Sharon's war drive, and also Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis. Möllemann always opposed economic sanctions against Iraq, as something that hurt the people rather than the regime. His death aims at the anti-war policy of Germany, and the immediate repudiation of the suicide thesis by leading politicians indicates an awareness of this link.