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Germany Rejects Latest Rumsfeld Criticism

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 4:29 p.m. ET

BERLIN (AP) -- German government leaders reacted testily Thursday after Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld lumped their country with Cuba and Libya among hard-line opponents of a war on Iraq. The opposition said it was a sign Germany is internationally isolated.

Rumsfeld's remark in congressional testimony Wednesday was his latest jab at Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who has ruled out sending German troops to Iraq and also says he will not back U.N. authorization of a war there.

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Gernot Erler, a senior lawmaker for Schroeder's left-leaning Social Democrats, said Rumsfeld's remark was unjustified.

"We have no sympathies whatsoever for Saddam or any reasons to support this regime -- quite the contrary," he said.

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, on a visit to Rome, played down the remark,

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saying it didn't reflect the tenor of his talks with Secretary of State Colin Powell during U.N. meetings Wednesday.

``I didn't get the impression there that this is the position of the American government," Fischer told ZDF television.

The conservative opposition seized on the remark to criticize Schroeder, even while lamenting its tone.

``One doesn't always have to like the American rhetoric," Wolfgang Schaeuble, a lawmaker and former leader of the main opposition Christian Democrats, said on MDR radio. ``But the fact is that, unfortunately, that is how we are behaving."

Another prominent conservative said Rumsfeld's comment showed Schroeder had led Germany into diplomatic isolation and caused a ``deep rift" in U.S.-German relations.

``Alarm bells should ring in Berlin when Germany is placed on the same level as countries like Cuba and Libya," said Michael Glos, parliamentary leader of the Bavaria-based Christian Social Union.

Rumsfeld was asked at a hearing what kind of cooperation the Bush administration could expect from other nations in the event of a war. He listed several he considered supportive and others he thought might come to back the operation.

``And then there are three or four countries that have said they won't do anything. I believe Libya, Cuba and Germany are the ones that I have indicated won't help in any respect," Rumsfeld told the House Armed Services Committee.

Last month, Rumsfeld angered many in Germany and France by describing those countries as problem allies symbolizing ``old Europe."

German conservatives have been stepping up attacks on Schroeder's Iraq policy since his party badly lost two state elections last weekend. The Social Democrats had campaigned on the anti-war platform that helped Schroeder win re-election in September.

Edmund Stoiber, the conservative Bavarian governor and Christian Social Union chief who narrowly failed to unseat Schroeder in last year's election, accused the chancellor on Thursday of squandering Germany's reliability as an ally.

But even some conservatives said Rumsfeld had gone too far. Bernd Posselt, who sits in the European Parliament for Stoiber's party, urged President Bush to fire his defense secretary, saying Rumsfeld was a threat to U.S.-German relations.

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