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Leaked e-mail links Merkel to controversial Afghan air strike

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CHANCELLOR ANGELA Merkel's office was informed hours after a German-ordered air strike in Afghanistan last September that civilians were among the casualties, contrary to previous claims about the controversial bombing.

An e-mail from Germany's secret service, leaked to Der Spiegel magazine, suggests the chancellery was informed nine hours after the German-ordered strike on September 4th that 50-100 civilians had been killed.

By contrast, for days after the strike – three weeks before the general election – former defence minister Franz Josef Jung claimed that “only Taliban terrorists” had been killed.

It later emerged that 142 people, at least half of whom were civilians, died in the bombing of two petrol tankers hijacked by the terrorists near Kunduz.

Mr Jung was forced to resign from Dr Merkel's new cabinet after it emerged that he knew about civilian casualties far earlier than he admitted in public.

Yesterday Mr Jung told a parliamentary inquiry into the bombing that it was “defamatory” to suggest there was a cover-up at the defence ministry. But such claims have hardened thanks to the leaked e-mail, the first link directly to the door of Chancellor Merkel.

“Merkel allowed the defence minister to lie about civilian casualties, contrary to the facts,” said Jürgen Trittin, co-leader of the opposition Greens.

Germany's bloodiest military incident since 1945 has, if anything, become more controversial in the passing six months.

After a Nato investigation, the defence ministry admitted the bombing was neither justified nor in keeping with Nato procedures. A Red Cross report named 74 civilians it said were killed in the bombing, including children as young as eight years old.

The current defence minister, Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, first called the bombing military justified, then changed his mind. He blamed his top two military advisers for the U-turn and dismissed them, claiming they had withheld crucial information from him. He then later changed his mind on being misinformed.

It later emerged that German special forces were closely involved in the strike, suggesting it was a targeted strike against Taliban leaders near the tankers and not, as claimed in public, a preventative measure to stop the tankers being turned into rolling bombs.

The steady drip of allegations is likely to undermine further Germany's Afghan mission, sold to a sceptical public in 2001 as one of reconstruction and stabilisation.