

When spies fall out

By Duncan Campbell
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Today in Brussels members of the European parliament will vote to finalise a report that condemns the use of the British and American-run "Echelon" international communications surveillance system as a breach of privacy, sovereignty and human rights.

The special report, which is expected to be adopted overwhelmingly by the full European parliament in September, calls for the European Convention on Human Rights to be amended to enforce the privacy of international communications to the same standard as applies to national communications.

It also demands that the British and German governments enforce their legal and treaty obligations to ensure proper supervision and accountability for secret US surveillance operations conducted from their territory. "The American authorities have repeatedly tried to justify the interception of telecommunications by accusing the European authorities of corruption and taking bribes," the report claims.

Both Britain and Germany host giant satellite-based listening stations which form the major part of the US international surveillance network. Bad Aibling station, in a spa town south of Munich, was the world's first satellite spy base, and started operating in 1968. Menwith Hill station, near Harrogate, is the largest electronic listening station in the world, and will play a major role in President Bush's controversial missile defence plans.

The world's largest electronic spying system, of which Echelon is a part, is run by an alliance of Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the US. It is founded on a still-secret 1948 agreement. The five nations share the take from their global network of surveillance stations. The only other worldwide systems are run by Russia, and by France, which has listening stations in South America and the South Pacific.

The developing spy base controversy has been seen as placing Britain under pressure to choose between its historic intelligence links with the US and the new European defence and intelligence initiatives spearheaded by Germany. These include the construction of a joint European satellite receiving station at Torrejon in Spain.

But recent events point to a deeper and different schism in Europe, with Washington moving to pre-empt British isolation and to undermine a German-led Europe rising to become a rival intelligence power.

It is a battle that only Bonn seems so far to have anticipated and joined. In a little-reported development two days after the European parliament report was published, irate US diplomats wrote to the German government to announce that, after lengthy negotiation with the central government and the state of Bavaria, the Bad Aibling base would be closed by September 2002.

The Bad Aibling row is the latest in a series of challenges by Bonn to the US on intelligence policy issues. In 1999, Germany was the first major country to denounce US intelligence-inspired attempts to control private and commercial cryptography to levels they could easily break.

France and most of the rest of Europe followed suit. By December, the US government had been forced to abandon its decade-old control policy on commercial and political grounds.

Four months ago, an edict from Bonn specified that German military and foreign service computer systems would be prohibited from using the Microsoft Windows system, on grounds that the program code was not open and could not be checked for security or "back door" flaws. American-designed computer operating systems would not be permitted for use on "sensitive" German government systems.

America's riposte on Echelon came in early June, after President Bush visited Madrid. Spanish and US officials openly spoke of new arrangements between the US and Spain to supply communications intelligence from the Echelon network to help fight Eta, the separatist Basque terrorist organisation. Since most Eta terrorists operate from south-western France, the Spanish-American deal effectively authorised US intelligence intercepting telephone calls and other communications in France.

The Eta-tracking deal is the first visible sign of longer-term US plans to set up new bilateral intelligence arrangements with selected European nations. The US has recently developed or extended intelligence links with Norway, Denmark and Switzerland, and has offered anti-terrorist intelligence sharing to the Italian and Greek governments, as well as the Spanish.

The plan appears to be to head off, or at least subvert and minimise the impact of, an independent European intelligence capability. In Bavaria and the Basque country, the battle lines have been drawn.