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Germany-US Secret Spy Project Denied

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Germany's aerospace center denied Monday that it is working with the U.S. on a \$270 million high-tech secret spy program, insisting that its plans for a high-resolution optical satellite have purely scientific and security uses.

U.S. State Department cables obtained by WikiLeaks and revealed by Norwegian daily Aftenposten say Germany joined a partnership with the U.S. to create a satellite spying program that was presented as a commercial enterprise, but is actually run by the German intelligence service and the German Aerospace Center, DLR.

German Aerospace Center spokesman Andreas Schuetz said that such a project for a high-resolution optical satellite has been in discussion for the past two years under the name HIROS.

"HIROS is neither a spy satellite, nor a secret project," Schuetz said. He insisted that the project was to be used only for government purposes, "for example crisis management during natural catastrophes and for scientific uses."

He refused to give any further details, saying the plan was still in the project stage and could not be discussed.

According to the cables, sent in 2009 and last year, the satellites were to be in place by 2013, but it wasn't clear if the funding for the project had been secured.

The cables from the U.S. Embassy in Berlin are among a trove of 250,000 uncensored diplomatic documents that secret-spilling site WikiLeaks has been making public. They were posted online by Aftenposten, which said last month it had obtained all the files.

Mitchell Moss, a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Berlin refused to comment on the cables, citing U.S. State Department policy that they are still considered classified.

A cable dated Feb. 15, 2009 describing the project said that Berlin believes such satellite technology would "provide an instrument of national power, and politically frees Germany from dependence on foreign sources of imagery."

The cables say the project had been causing friction with Germany's European Union partners, especially France, which was to be strictly excluded from the project.

They cite French efforts to halt the proposal as "fierce and persistent due to its potential competition with French industry."

The French Foreign Ministry refused to comment on reported French hostility to the satellite spy program, saying in its traditional Monday online briefing that "we confirm nothing attributed to authorities and French diplomats in documents revealed by the WikiLeaks site."

Germany's Defense Ministry, which was also cited in the cables as being involved in the project, had no immediate comment