

German Protestant leader opposes Afghanistan war: "This war cannot be justified"

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Germany's senior Protestant bishop, Margot Kässmann, who has criticized her nation's military strategy in Afghanistan since giving a New Year sermon in which she said that weapons were "clearly not creating peace" there, has recently drawn support from a Catholic archbishop.

Reinhard Marx, the Catholic archbishop of Munich and Freising, was reported by a Bavarian broadcaster as saying that Kässmann had started an important debate about the war in Afghanistan.

"Maybe the Afghanistan [military] mission is no longer where at the beginning we would have liked it to be," said Marx on January 17.

Germany has more than 4,000 troops in Afghanistan—the third-largest contingent in the NATO-led international force there. The German military role has been questioned, particularly since a German-ordered air strike in September led to civilian deaths.

Kässmann was elected in October to lead the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the country's main Protestant grouping.

In an interview with Germany's *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung* news paper in December, before her New Year sermon, Kässmann said, "Even by the broadest standards of the Evangelical Church in Germany, this war cannot be justified. Therefore, the armed conflict must be ended as soon as possible."

She urged a "clear exit strategy" but warned against an "over hasty" withdrawal of troops.

Recent opinion polls in Germany have shown an estimated 71 percent of people against the German army's operations in Afghanistan.

However, Germany's development minister, Dirk Niebel, describes his country's deployment in Afghanistan as necessary. "Ms. Kässmann may have an opinion about Afghanistan but she should not express her criticism of the Afghanistan deployment of the army on behalf of church members," he said.

Kässmann repeated her criticism January 17 at a public discussion in Berlin with Gregor Gysi, the parliamentary leader of the Left Party, the only party in the German parliament that says it is totally opposed to Germany's military presence in Afghanistan. "The lid has been kept on the debate for far too long," said Kässmann.

She had met January 11 with German defense minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who later told reporters their talks were "a good start to a necessary discussion." He said he invited Kässmann to accompany him to Afghanistan so that she could observe the situation firsthand. *-Ecumenical News International*