

German government seeks to end standoff over spy chief

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FILE PHOTO: Chinese President Xi Jinping walks next to German Chancellor Angela Merkel to attend the G20 leaders summit in Hamburg, Germany July 7, 2017. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay/File Photo

Berlin: The leaders of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's governing coalition were trying Sunday to resolve a standoff over the future of the country's domestic intelligence chief and stabilize their six-month-old alliance.

The center-left Social Democrats want Hans-Georg Maassen removed for appearing to downplay recent violence against migrants, but conservative Interior Minister Horst Seehofer has stood by him.

Last week, coalition leaders agreed to replace Maassen as head of Germany's BfV spy agency but give him a new job as a deputy interior minister — a promotion with a hefty pay rise. The move infuriated many members of the center-left Social Democrats. Seehofer leads the Bavaria-only Christian Social Union, the government's third coalition partner.

On Friday, Social Democrat leader Andrea Nahles asked Merkel and Seehofer to renegotiate the deal. Merkel said she wanted a solution over the weekend, though she hasn't said what her own opinion is of Maassen. Merkel's coalition took office in March after the Social Democrats decided reluctantly to join up.

It has already been through one crisis that threatened its survival, when Merkel and Seehofer — a conservative ally, but a longtime critic of her initially welcoming approach to refugees in 2015 — faced off in June over whether to turn back some migrants at the German-Austrian border.

Responding to violent right-wing protests following the killing of a German man, allegedly by migrants, in the eastern city of Chemnitz, Maassen said his agency had no reliable evidence that foreigners were being "hunted" down in the streets — a term Merkel had used.

A video posted by a left-wing group showed protesters chasing down and attacking a foreigner but Maassen questioned its authenticity.

Seehofer, Maassen's boss, told Sunday's Bild am Sonntag newspaper that coalition leaders will have to spend a lot of time in phone calls over the weekend but will only meet when it's clear how a solution could work.

Seehofer said Maassen is a "highly competent" employee who hasn't violated any rules and that he won't outright dismiss him. He accused the Social Democrats of running a "campaign" against Maassen.

The issue is clouding the government's future at a time when the three parties face major challenges in upcoming state elections, in Seehofer's home state of Bavaria on Oct. 14 and in neighboring Hesse on Oct. 28. The infighting appears to be weighing down their support.

- AP