Germany lobbies for UN online privacy charter

FRANK JORDANS, Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) -- Senior German officials are seeking European support for a new global charter safeguarding personal privacy online, as the country's data protection watchdogs called Wednesday for the suspension of a key agreement with the United States over revelations about U.S. intelligence-gathering on the Internet.

The moves reflect concerns in Germany that the U.S. National Security Agency may have collected personal information on millions of Web users in breach of national and international rules. The claim, made by NSA leaker Edward Snowden, has become an election issue in Germany two months before the country goes to the polls.

A letter sent by Germany's foreign and justice ministers to their European Union counterparts proposes expanding a 1966 U.N. human rights treaty to cover modern forms of communication like email, instant messaging and social media.

"We want to use the current debate to launch an initiative that would outline the inalienable privacy rights under current conditions," the two ministers wrote. The letter, sent last week but only released Wednesday, suggests convening a meeting of all 167 parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The United States ratified the treaty in 1992.

U.S. officials have defended the NSA programs as necessary to prevent terrorist attacks.

But Germany's independent privacy watchdogs said the surveillance programs breach an EU-U.S. pact meant to ensure cross-border data protection.

The 2000 `Safe Harbor' agreement requires U.S. companies to grant European customers the same level of data protection they could expect in Europe - even if their data is processed or stored elsewhere. But according to Snowden, one NSA program known as PRISM gives the agency comprehensive access to customer data from companies such as Google and Facebook.

The data protection commissioners said the practice effectively makes interception of personal data routine, rather than the exception, and urged European officials to consider suspending the agreement "in view of the excessive surveillance activities of foreign intelligence agencies."

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