

State Security files should be archived, says Stasi archives chief

By Tamim Elyan
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CAIRO: State security documents should be archived, said the man in charge of the secret police and surveillance files of East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990.

Herbert Ziehm, who heads the office of the Federal Commissioner for the State Security (Stasi) Archives of East Germany also warned that the new National Security Sector replacing Egypt's disbanded State Security should have "clear" tasks and must operate under the supervision of parliament and civil society to ensure that it doesn't broaden its authorities.

"Five or 10 years aren't enough to discuss this issue, and it demands an open government that is ready to deal with civil society, as well as, public participation," Ziehm said Sunday during a visit to Cairo.

The Stasi archives commission is responsible, according to the State Security Documents Law issued by the German Parliament in 1990, for archiving Stasi documents and managing requests of the public and media to view them.

In January 1990, Ziehm was one of many Eastern German protestors who broke into Stasi headquarters, leading to the disbandment of the hated institution.

He says that 140 kilometers worth of documents and tens of thousands of voice and video recordings of 5.4 million people who were being followed or investigated, including foreigners in Germany, were found in the building.

The law allows individuals to view information that was gathered about them, using information in the rehabilitation of victims and allows media access to the documents. However this is only granted after permission from the individuals concerned following

a rigid method of processing requests.

"We have received more than six million requests over the past 20 years. These documents aren't meant to harm previous workers and employees at State Security but only to help victims," Ziehm said.

Ziehm compared the storming of Stasi headquarters in Germany to similar events in Egypt last March, when protesters found the doors opened for them. Unlike their Egyptian counterparts however, the German protesters didn't leave the buildings afterwards and cooperated with the police to secure the documents.

"There were wide public discussions over what to do with the documents," Ziehm said.

In Egypt, activists immediately posted scans of the documents they found in the State Security headquarters online, but the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces called on all media outlets to act responsibly in publishing classified documents to avoid tarnishing the reputations of public figures. The majority obliged. Stacks of documents were left inside the buildings that were stormed by protesters, with judges and military police promising to analyze them.

Ziehm said the German Minister of Interior in the 1990s put a horrifying scenario that if the files were kept, the country might enter a civil war if people found out who was cooperating with the Stasi since it emerged that even friends and family members spied on each other.

However popular movements defending citizens' rights wanted the files kept for victims to know who was torturing them and to identify who was cooperating with the Stasi in order to ban them from entering parliament.

They also wanted to revoke unfair court rulings handed

down to some people, return property and jobs to people who were deprived of them because of Stasi interference, and allow students who were banned from universities and schools for their political activity to resume their academic life.

"The first parliament elected after unifying Eastern and Western Germany issued a law legally organizing State Security documents and allowing the public to see them without violating personal information of individuals although they were collected illegally," Ziehm said.

"We handled the issue in a special way. In other European countries State Security continued to work according to new laws and regulations," Ziehm said.

He said that in Germany State Security is now replaced by the Constitution Protection Authority, intelligence services and police which were not allowed to use State Security documents.

"State Security only protected the ruling party and had the authority to illegally arrest and detain suspects, but the intelligence may convey suspicions to police and they investigate and have the authority to arrest suspects and their work is monitored by the parliament," Ziehm said.

He said that the 90,000 employees, officers and experts at the Stasi were moved to other posts at the police or started their own private businesses.

"We could have considered the Ministry of Security as a criminal entity and then all its [staff] would be prosecuted but this would have created problems since they weren't all involved in illegal violations," Ziehm said.

Those who were proven to have illegally arrested people or profiteered were prosecuted and the media published a list of their names and all those who cooperated with them, he added.

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