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German Media Spotlights Racism

By our Foreign Editor Margreet Strijbosch, 11 August 2000

Violence from the extreme right has been happening in Germany for years. But this summer, the problem is receiving a lot of attention in the German media. Every night, German politicians are on the TV with new suggestions about how to tackle the neo-nazi skinheads. But the question remains when foreigners living in Germany will be able to feel safe again.



In 1990, an Angolan man was shot dead by extreme right youths in the eastern German town of Eberswalde. The man was the first victim of race hatred in the former East Germany. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, that sort of thing only happened in West Germany. But neo-nazism has found an even more fertile breeding ground in the east of the country. Foreigners there don't feel safe on the streets any more in the evenings.

Catalyst

Although this racial violence has been going on for ten years, the German media have only begun to give wide coverage to the problem this summer. The catalyst was a bomb attack at a railway station in Dusseldorf, although ironically it's still not certain that this attack was racially motivated. However, many of the victims were Jewish. Earlier this summer a black, a punk and a civilian were all shot dead. The time was right for a national debate in Germany.

Calls for Action

As a result of the discussion, calls for an official response have become very loud. The police must now crack down as hard against the radical right as they did in the seventies and eighties against the Rote Armee Fraktion. Minds must be sharpened, employees with radical right ideas should be fired, and there should be a ban on extreme right organisations. But the question is whether these sorts of measures will actually bring an end to the violence. Experts say that tougher penalties make no sense as long as the climate in which extreme right ideas flourish does not change. Particularly in eastern Germany, a lot of people feel like second-class citizens. Many there are jobless, and young people are frustrated by the idea that their compatriots in the west are successful, and they're not. They have also been psychologically scarred by four decades of Communist dictatorship.

All this has created a situation where violent extreme-right youths get the idea that they want to challenge the will of the majority. That manifests itself in the desire to rid the whole of society of foreigners.

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