Germany’s interior ministry is facing criticism for buying airport body scanners from the subsidiary of a US company known to produce internationally banned cluster munitions. But it looks unlikely to cancel the deal.

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The German Interior Ministry has bought two full-body scanners to be used for tests at Hamburg airport in September. The devices come from a subsidiary of the US L3 Communications company, which according to a survey by the IKV PAX Christi aid organization, is one of seven firms that still produces cluster ammunition.

The deal has come under pressure because Germany is a signatory to the Convention of the Banning of Cluster Munitions which came into force on August 1. At a news conference in Berlin on Monday, ministry spokesman Philipp Spauschus had a hard time justifying the deal.

"There are no other producers in the world that are able to deliver body scanners of the quality that the US company boasts," Spauschus said. "If we were to cancel the contract now, we'd not be able to carry out any tests at Hamburg airport."

Passing the buck

The spokesman added that the delivery request had gone out solely to EAS Envimet Analytical Systems based in Brunn, Austria, which had then ordered the scanners from L3 Communications Security and Detection Systems in the US.

It is widely believed that the ministry must have known from the start where the scanners would originate. Spauschus left this question unanswered on Monday, saying that the government was only now looking into whether the deal was ethically acceptable.

Francois de Keersmaeker, managing director of the Handicap International aid group that supports cluster bomb victims, accused the government in Berlin of double standards. Knowing that there’s no legal instrument of preventing such deals, he pointed to the moral and political dimensions involved.

Moral standards asked for

"You simply weaken the treaty prohibiting cluster munitions if you pursue such business activities," de Keersmaeker told Deutsche Welle. "The German government - like every other potential buyer - should adhere to some ethical norms while deciding where to buy what, and Berlin should in future be more careful about it."

Thomas Kuechenmeister, of the German landmine.de pressure group, also found that such business contracts should be taboo for countries which signed the Convention on the Banning of Cluster Munitions.

"I call on the government in Berlin to renounce such deals immediately," Kuechenmeister said.

So far, well over 100 countries have signed and another 37 nations have ratified the convention that prohibits the production and proliferation of cluster ammunition. This type of weapon has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians the world over.

But the treaty has not been signed yet by some of the world's largest producers or possessors of cluster bombs, including China, Russia, the United States, Pakistan and Brazil.

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