Germany arrests Tunisian man for producing biological weapon in his apartment

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German police raid apartment in Cologne on Thursday
Image credit: Deutsche Presse-Agentur

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German authorities have charged a Tunisian citizen with building a biological weapon, after finding significant quantities of the highly toxic substance ricin in his apartment. The 29-year-old man is referred to in public reports only as "Sief Allah H.", in compliance with German law that forbids the naming of suspects until they are found guilty in court. German officials said last Thursday that the man remains in custody and has been charged with violating Germany's War Weapons Control Act (known as Kriegswaffenkontrollgesetz) and "preparing a serious act of violence against the state".

According to reports, German intelligence services received a tip-off last month that the man had made online purchases of a coffee grinder and 1,000 castor seeds. Processing castor seeds creates a ricin byproduct, which can then be weaponized in the form of a powder, a fine mist, or solid pellets of various sizes. The end product is more powerful than many other toxic substances, such as cyanide. Upon entering the human body, ricin can cause multiple organ failure in less than two days. It has no known antidote.

After receiving the tip-off, German authorities began monitoring the suspect's movements in the western German city of Cologne, near the Belgian and Dutch borders. By June, German police discovered that he had produced enough ricin to dispense as many as 1,000 lethal doses.

German media reported that "Sief Allah H." is a sympathizer of the Islamic State. However, investigators have found no direct link between him and any militant organizations in Germany or abroad. Additionally, no evidence has yet been presented that he had planned an actual attack —in Germany or elsewhere— at a specific time. However, officials from Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution said it was "very likely" that the arrest of "Sief Allah H." had averted a terrorist attack. Late last week, German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* said that the suspect had made ricin by following instructions posted online by the Islamic State.

Throughout the weekend, several other apartments in Cologne were searched by German authorities. Search parties consisted of members of the local police, intelligence officers and scientists from the Robert Koch Institute, the German government agency tasked with monitoring hazards to public health.