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## France and Germany eat their words on US trade talks

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Berlin - France and Germany have backed down on threats to suspend US trade talks, after the US offered to set up more "working groups" on data protection.

EU leaders meeting in Berlin on Wednesday (3 July) for a summit on youth unemployment said the US trade negotiations will start next week as planned.

The announcement comes after France and Germany led EU criticism of the US in recent days.

French President Francois Hollande's spokesman had said on Wednesday morning the talks should be put on hold until the US fully clarifies if it is snooping on EU citizens and bugging EU offices in Brussels, New York and Washington.

 But on Wednesday evening Hollande said the US offer on extra working groups is good enough.

"The French position is that there can be no start of trade negotiations without at the same time opening talks and verifications on data protection. This is a compromise, but a good one," he said at a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso.

Merkel's spokesman said earlier this week the talks are in doubt because the US had broken trust. He dubbed the US operation Cold-War-type espionage.

But Merkel also struck a conciliatory note on Wednesday.

"I want to underline that we are all very concerned about some activities and we have to clarify if and how they took place. The US has promised to quickly set up these working groups. Time is pressing," she said.

For his part, Barroso talked up the importance of the trade pact.

"Regarding the trade deal, both the EU and the US have a strong interest to conclude a treaty which would have huge potential for economic growth on both sides of the Atlantic," he noted.

"Negotiations are and remain a top priority. In parallel, it is important to clear some concerns on intelligence activities, privacy and data protection. We agreed today we are committed to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, but in parallel we will set up working groups that will analyse intelligence activities and the collection and use of data," he added.

He said US attorney general Eric Holder has promised justice commissioner Viviane Reding to create the groups as soon as possible.

Previous groups were created when media uncovered other US mass-surveillance programmes on EU bank data (Swift) and personal records of European air passengers (PNR) a few years ago.

But the US intelligence gathering has continued, with some minor adjustments on data protection.

Hollande was also asked about allegedly blocking Bolivian President Evo Morales from flying over France on Tuesday.

Morales was suspected to be flying to Bolivia from Moscow with Edward Snowden, the man who leaked documents on the US spy operation.

Morales' flight had to land in Vienna, where it was searched, but Snowden was not on board.

Bolivia and other Latin American leaders voiced outrage on Wednesday at what they called US and EU "imperialism."

A crowd in La Paz burned the French flag and threw stones at the French embassy.

Hollande in Berlin said the fiasco was a simple mistake.

He said he had conflicting information on "two planes" and that when he found out Morales was on one of them, he "personally" gave it permission to fly over France, but by then it was too late.

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