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## **NEWSMAKER-Bodo Hombach, the EU's man in the Balkans**

By Clifford Coonan

BONN, June 29 (Reuters) - Bodo Hombach, appointed as head of European reconstruction efforts in the Balkans on Tuesday, secured the job despite his inexperience in international politics and allegations of irregularities.

Chancellery Minister Hombach is an old-school Social Democrat political fixer, a close ally of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, but one who seems to have fallen out of favour because of his inability to check his rampant ambition.

His profile has been raised since his appointment last October by his much-publicised book on "New Centre" politics and his frequent TV appearances as mediator of negotiations over a German industry compensation fund for Nazi-era slave workers.

As chancellery minister, Hombach's role is to coordinate the work of Schroeder's centre-left coalition of SPD and Greens -- a task some commentators say he has fallen down on, citing the government's at-times chaotic first nine months in office.

They also say that instead he has taken on high-profile personal missions such as the slave labour fund and a bid to save German businessman Helmut Hofer from execution in Iran for allegedly having illicit sex with a Moslem woman.

Opposition Christian Democrats (CDU) had said that one crucial obstacle to Hombach's appointment was that he had not fully answered allegations of financial irregularities over construction work on his house. Hombach has denied the allegations.

Hombach, 46, is a big man, standing nearly two metres (six-and-a-half feet) tall and weighing in at over 100 kilos (220 lbs).

He joined the Social Democrats in 1971 and became manager of the party's largest state group in North Rhine-Westphalia.

At just 28 years of age, the cigar-puffing Hombach managed the 1980 election campaign for state premier Johannes Rau, who was recently elected Germany's next President.

He steered Rau to three consecutive election victories and was appointed to head Rau's federal campaign in 1986 when he unsuccessfully tried to oust Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

The pragmatic and business-friendly Hombach clashed with the socialist functionaries in the "Barracks," as the SPD's Bonn headquarters are known, and tried to run the federal campaign from his Duesseldorf offices without success.

Two months before that election he quit politics in 1991 and went to work for the steel and energy

group Preussag. He remained a close advisor to Rau and, later, to Schroeder.

Like Schroeder, Hombach has at best a lukewarm relationship with the SPD party machine in Bonn and news of his appointment as the EU Balkan envoy will have been greeted with glee among some of the party apparatchiks in Bonn.

Germany considers the EU Balkans stability pact coordinator job its own.

The pact, which is aimed at shoring up democracy in war-torn southeastern Europe, is the brain child of Germany and so it figured that its candidate could legitimately claim more right to the post.

Hombach's work starts when the 15-member EU and 13 other participating nations hold a summit meeting in July in Sarajevo to work out reconstruction plans.

The summit was proposed by Germany, EU president until the end of June.