

Merkel faces key test over controversial health reforms

Members of Merkel's bickering conservative and Social Democrat coalition will attempt to finally hammer out an agreement on the government's controversial and deeply disliked plans for shoring up the nation's deficit-hit health service.

The highly charged battle over the health reform plan comes as Merkel prepares to mark the first anniversary of her emergence as Germany's first woman chancellor.

Health policy experts from Merkel's grand coalition are to meet in a bid to try to lay the ground for a meeting of government leaders on Wednesday to sign off on the healthcare changes, which includes a half a percentage point increase in contributions.

"We are heading towards chaos," said Social Democrat health expert Karl Lauterbach ahead of the meeting. If the reform fails, he said, "The government's work will be set back."

Monday's meeting of experts to try to bridge the differences over the plan, which also includes cutbacks in subsidies for health insurance cover such as children sickness pay and maternity payments, follows their failure to reach an accord at marathon talks last Thursday.

"It is too difficult to predict if an agreement can be reached," said Wolfgang Z

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