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U.S. Fears Papal Plot May Affect Soviet Ties

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 30 — Reagan Administration officials said today that if Bulgarians were found guilty in Italy of conspiring to assassinate Pope John Paul II, the United States would face the issue of whether to go ahead in seeking improved relations with the Soviet Union.

The officials said they did not expect the trial of three Bulgarians, only one of whom is in Italian custody, and of four Turks, two of whom are in custody, to begin before next summer. They said that this would be about the time the United States expects arms talks to resume with the Soviet Union, no matter who is elected President next Tuesday.

Even though no Russians have been implicated in the attempt by Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turk, to kill the Pope on May 13, 1981, American officials said that, if any Bulgarians were found guilty, it would be difficult to dissociate them from Soviet direction.

'Tremendous Policy Problem'

"We will have one tremendous policy problem about dealing with the Russians," a State Department official said. "There will be a lot of people saying that we should just cut off all contacts with them."

Another official said, "We will have to face up to the problem; it is too horrendous to sweep under the rug."

The official American position, as stated by the State Department on Friday after publication of the Italian indictment, is:

"We have and will continue to avoid taking any public position on the merits of this case as it proceeds through the Italian judicial process. There should be no mistake as to the gravity with which we view the attempt on the life of the Pope."

Ever since late 1982, when there were reports of Bulgarian and possibly Soviet complicity, American intelligence agencies have been reluctant to endorse the view that Moscow engineered the plot. American officials have said that, while there was circumstantial evidence, they wanted to withhold any such conclusions.

Bulgaria has denied any involvement by its citizens. Together with the Soviet Union, Bulgaria contends that the United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency, was responsible for recruiting Mr. Agca and was trying to fabricate the Bulgarian connection for propaganda reasons.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser under President Carter, criticized Administration officials last weekend for "pooh-poohing what turns out to be a very serious plot."

"I think it is absolutely scandalous that some officials in the State Department and some senior officials in the C.I.A. were unwitting, or in some cases, perhaps, even witting tools of that campaign," he said in an interview with the R.K.O. Radio Network.

Evidence Is Called Circumstantial

Today a senior Administration official insisted that the evidence "is still circumstantial, as far as the Bulgarians are concerned."

"It may turn out to be correct, given the history of Soviet involvement in assassinations," the official said.

If Mr. Reagan is re-elected, Secretary of State George P. Shultz has promised an effort to bring the Soviet Union back to arms control talks. In a speech on Thursday, Mr. Shultz also called for tougher American responses to acts of terrorism.

A senior Administration official said in an interview that he would like to see how Mr. Shultz could seek arms accords with the Soviet Union if Bulgarians were found guilty of conspiracy in trying to kill the Pope.

In a recent speech in Los Angeles, Mr. Shultz touched on the issue of linking sanctions against the Soviet Union in one field to Soviet activities in another field.

He argued, in effect, for proceeding with arms control talks, despite Soviet actions in other fields.

"In the nuclear age, we need to maintain a relationship with the Soviet Union," he said. "Yet, we know that they have acted in ways that violate our standards of human conduct and rule of law and that are repugnant to us — and they will likely continue to do so in the future."

He conceded that there "will be times when we must make progress in one dimension of the relationship contingent on progress in others," but he said that if agreements benefit the United States, they should be maintained "under all but exceptional circumstances."

Less Interest in West Europe

Another State Department official said that, if evidence were produced supporting the charges against the Bulgarians, "we are going to have a very big problem trying to get public backing for anything with the Russians."

American policy is to develop its response to the conspiracy jointly with its Atlantic allies, an official said. But American officials and Western European diplomats say that, except in Italy, the case has lost its interest for the Western Europeans. They noted that West Germany had invited Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian leader, a visit he had to call off under Soviet pressure.

In the view of American officials, the United States may therefore have to persuade its allies into taking a tougher position not only toward Bulgaria, but also possibly toward the Soviet Union, a move sure to sour relations.

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