

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 31NEWSWEEK
7 FEBRUARY 1983

ITALY

New Twists in the Plot to Kill the Pope

As Italy presses the Bulgarian connection in the plot to kill the pope, the Reagan administration is keeping mum. In Washington, officials continued to warn journalists not to jump to conclusions, based on circumstantial evidence, that Yuri Andropov's KGB masterminded the affair. From Rome, NBC complained that the CIA was doing more than that: actively discouraging journalists from pursuing leads in the case. Whether that was true or not the administration had a problem on its hands. If the Italians make their case, the ensuing outrage would convulse East-West relations and might scuttle any arms-control talks.

Ronald Reagan's reticence to speak out on the case has left the Italian government feeling a little isolated. Still, nothing seems

to have stalled the probe itself. Sources close to the investigation say that Musar Cedar Celebi, a Turk who was extradited earlier this month from West Germany by the Italians, has now admitted that he met Mehmet Ali Agca several times in Europe and gave Agca money some time before the shooting. Agca claims that Celebi was his go-between with the Bulgarians in the plot. Celebi counters that he gave money to Agca just to help out a fellow countryman fallen on hard times. Turks in Rome find Celebi's explanation unconvincing because Agca was well known in the community as an escaped terrorist. Said one Turkish source: "Why would he give money to Agca? Everyone knew who he was."

In another development, NBC News reported that some of the same characters may have plotted to kill Lech Walesa. During Walesa's six-day visit to Rome in 1981, Agca and Sergei Antonov supposedly met at the Hotel Archimede to discuss a hit on the Soli-

arity leader. Giuseppe Consolo, Antonov's lawyer, calls that charge "incredible" and insists that "as Agca's position becomes weaker, a new absurd story comes along."

The Bulgarian government, meanwhile, has launched a public-relations campaign of its own. In Sofia, The New York Times interviewed some of the prime suspects in the case: two former employees of the Bulgarian embassy in Rome—Todor Aivazov and Maj. Zhelyu Vasilev—and a Turkish businessman and reputed drug-smuggler—Bekir Celenk. Predictably, all protested their innocence. "Do you really think I look like a conspirator of murder?" asked a jovial Aivazov. The suspects were in no danger of extradition. In Rome, Antonov, a Bulgarian airline official, stayed in jail. Magistrate Ilario Martella, who heads the Italian investigation, recently turned down an appeal by Antonov's lawyers, who contended that he should be set free for lack of evidence. Bulgarian witnesses had claimed that Antonov was in his office on the day of the shooting. By rejecting their testimony, Martella demonstrated his determination to press the case to its conclusion. Even if the judge doesn't find Andropov's own fingerprints on the plot, lingering suspicions about KGB conspiracies are bound to soil the new Soviet leader's image for some time to come.

KIM ROGAL with ANDREW NAGORSKI in Rome
and DAVID C. MARTIN in Washington