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McDonald Says U.S. Covering Up KGB Role In Pope Shooting

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There is "growing evidence" that U.S. government officials are "trying to suppress" information linking the Soviet secret police to the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II in the spring of 1981, Georgia Congressman Larry McDonald charged Friday.

In letters delivered Friday morning to President Reagan, CIA Director William Casey, and Rep. Ed Boland, D-Mass., chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, Rep. McDonald asks the officials to act on published allegations about a government-inspired "cover-up" designed to keep U.S./Soviet arms control and trade arrangements from being jeopardized.

"The letter to Boland asks that he schedule immediate public hearings into reported attempts by U.S. officials to suppress investigations by the Italian government and newsmen, including U.S. newsmen, into the reported role of the Soviet KGB in the attack on the pope," Rep. McDonald's press secretary, Tommy Toles, said Friday.

"The letter to Casey specifically asks whether the CIA is involved in any effort to cover up, and, if so, who gave the order for a cover-up," Mr. Toles continued. He added, however, that "no one expects" the CIA director to admit there is a cover-up, "but the reason for writing the letter is to bring it to the attention of the public."

The third letter, to the president, according to Mr. Toles, "outlines evidence that the KGB is involved based on reports in both the Reader's Digest and the NBC television news."

"Last year, NBC presented a program called 'The Man Who Shot the Pope - A Study in Terrorism,'" the press secretary explained. "The tentative implications at the time were that the KGB was, perhaps involved.

"In an updated version of the program Tuesday (Jan. 25) they said they had 'firm' evidence that the KGB was responsible, ultimately, in the attempted assassination, primarily because of the pope's vigorous support of the Solidarity movement in Poland, and (NBC) pointed out that that becomes more significant because at the time the head of the KGB was Yuri Andropov, now head of the Soviet government."

Mr. Toles continued, saying that the recent NBC report claimed the CIA and American officials have "attempted to squelch" the investigation by Italian authorities into the purported KGB links to the assassination attempt through the Bulgarian secret police.

According to the NBC reports, Mr. Toles said, the apparent reason for the "cover-up" was that "the U.S. is afraid of international repercussions if it is shown that Andropov, now head of the Soviet government, ordered the assassination, and it would endanger on-going arms control talks and trade talks between the two nations."

Rep. McDonald, when asked if he is convinced there is a KGB connection to the attempt to kill the pope, responded, "Yes, in my own mind I feel that the evidence clearly and overwhelmingly points that this was an assassination attempt to destroy the Polish pope who had given support to the Solidarity movement in Poland that was jeopardizing the stability of the subjugated countries in Eastern Europe."

"...The Soviets were very fearful of what happening in Eastern Europe and felt that the movement in Poland had to be suppressed," continued the congressman. "To do that required the destruction of the Polish Pope who was giving so much support and morale to the Solidarity movement."

"In my own mind, very clearly, the KGB was behind the assassination attempt."

Congressman McDonald added that "the thing that is frightening to me is the growing evidence that our government is trying to suppress that information."

Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turk, was jailed by Italian authorities for shooting and wounding Pope Paul May 13, 1981, and authorities have charged Sergei Ivanov Antonov, former head of the Bulgarian Airlines office in Rome, with active complicity in the assassination try.

In its latest report, NBC said evidence is "even more persuasive" than earlier reported that both the Bulgarian and Soviet secret police were involved in the incident.

Declaring that "some key officials of the CIA" in Rome and Washington are "actively discouraging American newsmen and Italian investigators," diplomatic correspondent Marvin Kalb said, "Part of the explanation lies in the ironic fact that many in the U.S. and western Europe would rather not be presented with proof of Soviet complicity at this time."

"That could shatter hopes for detente, trade and arms agreements," NBC said.

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