

Report from Italy by Mauro Ariosto

'Civil war' conditions in Sicily

Craxi's war on the mafia will not succeed, unless Italy breaks ties with Libya.

The Italian government's fight against the mafia in Sicily has now assumed the proportions of "an open conflict, a civil war." This was how Sicily regional President Rino Nicolosi put it, the day after yet another top police official was mowed down in front of his home in Palermo, by machine-gun fire from a 20-man mafia commando squad, armed with Russian-made weapons.

Antonio Cassarà, head of the Palermo Mobile Squad, only outlived by a few days his major collaborator, Police Commissioner Giuseppe Montana, who on July 28 was pumped full of 200 bullets, after it became known that he was on the tail of Michele Greco, the "pope" of the Cosa Nostra.

Just another mafia war? Hardly. Italian authorities now have more than ample proof of the close logistical ties between the drug-running mafia and such Soviet-directed terrorist gangs as the Red Brigades. With the Soviet Union already gaining influence over Greece, continued regional chaos in southern Italy, fed in large part by Libya's Qaddafi, is now critical to Moscow's bid to gain strategic control of the entire Mediterranean littoral.

Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi has vowed to use "extraordinary measures" to stamp out the mafia, and has expedited a 1,000-man reinforcement to Sicily. "This is a military challenge," he announced following the Montana murder. "It is necessary to

give severe, efficient and immediate answers."

But on the same day the mafia was eliminating Montana, Craxi's own foreign minister, Giulio Andreotti, was presiding over the Italian-Libyan Commission, with the aim of firming up economic and other ties with the Libyan government. Supporting Libya is not exactly the best way to eliminate international terrorism.

The recent murders are different for another reason. The mafia, with the help of the Italian media, has managed to direct popular rage against the police, while portraying themselves as modern-day folk-heroes.

Montana was killed some weeks after he had arrested a gang of eight, one of whom was very close to Michele Greco. It seemed sure that Greco and the other big Sicilian bosses are living in Sicily, well protected, and that Montana was on their trail.

Contrary to past assassinations, the media did not give big coverage to the event. Instead, starting on Aug. 4, the national press launched a front-page campaign covering the death of a man who was being interrogated for the murder of Montana. Some newspapers speculated that the man had been poisoned by the police while in jail.

In a major publicity stunt, the infamous head of the Italian Radical Party, Marco Pannella, flew to Palermo to comfort the relatives of the "victim," declaring that the poor chap had

died because of police torture.

The uproar forced Interior Minister Oscar Scalfaro to fire the three heads of the Palermo police, even though there was no proof of any foul play during the interrogation. The press, especially the left-liberal-Communist papers, proclaimed a "victory for democracy and truth."

Then on Aug. 6, Cassarà was murdered, during commemoration of the murder of Judge Gaetano Costa, who was killed by the mafia that same day five years before (only four days after a bomb exploded in the Bologna main station, killing more than 80 people).

Cassarà had been to Brazil to investigate the holdings of the mafia there, and had made frequent trips to the United States to coordinate anti-mafia, anti-drug operations. He was also the author of a large part of the "161 names" report presented by General Dalla Chiesa, who was murdered on Sept. 3, 1982. The Greco family was on that list.

This was too much for the Palermo police, who exploded in rage and frustration. The murder of Cassarà was presented by the media as the mafia's "revenge" for the death of the "picciotto" (mafia slang for "kid") in the police headquarters.

The ugliest incidents occurred the next day, around the funeral of Antiochia, one of Cassarà's escorts who had been killed along with him. Upon exiting the church, Interior Minister Scalfaro and President Cossiga were besieged and buffeted by a crowd of furious policemen, and could only be brought away with great difficulty by the carabinieri. According to one newspaper, this scene was followed by actual armed street skirmishes between the police and the carabinieri.

About 200 policemen asked either to be transferred from Palermo or to resign from the force. Half of the requests have been accepted.