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SUBJECT: (C) VATICAN BACKS AWAY FROM DEAL WITH INTERNATIONAL
HOLOCAUST TASK FORCE

REF: A. VATICAN 25 B. VATICAN 99

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CLASSIFIED BY: Julieta Valls Noyes, DCM, EXEC, State. REASON:

1.4 (b) 1. (C) Summary: On October 13, the Holy See walked back from a prior written agreement to become an observer on the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF). The decision may have been taken by the Vatican's relatively inexperienced new deputy foreign minister, and if so, would not be the first time he has complicated Vatican foreign relations. But the Vatican may also be pulling back due to concerns about ITF pressure to declassify records from the WWII-era pontificate of Pope Pius XII. Regardless of the cause, the ITF will continue to pursue closer ties with the Holy See in the months ahead. End Summary.

High Hopes Dashed

¶2. (C) Three members of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF) visited Rome this week to finalize arrangements with the Holy See to become an ITF observer. However, over lunch on October 13, the team members told the Austrian Ambassador and UK and U.S. DCM's that the plan had fallen apart completely that morning due to Vatican back-pedaling. Team members -- Austrian Ambassador Ferdinand Trauttsmandorff, U.S. Professor Steve Katz of the Elie Wiesel Center at Boston University, and Dina Porat, the Israeli academic advisor to the ITF -- expressed considerable disappointment about the unexpected set-back.

¶3. (C) They were especially chagrined, Trauttsmandorff said, because the Vatican had first offered more than the ITF asked then rescinded its commitment. Specifically, the ITF had suggested during a February visit to Rome that the Vatican enter into a "special arrangement" with the body. The February talks and follow up discussions went very well (ref a). Subsequently, the then-Deputy Foreign Minister-equivalent at the Holy See, Monsignor Pietro Parolin, wrote to the ITF to indicate that the Vatican wanted more than a "special arrangement" and was prepared to become an ITF observer. (Note: It's unclear whether Parolin suggested permanent observer or observer country status for the Vatican. End Note)

New Vatican Team Disappoints

¶4. (C) On arrival in Rome in October, though, the ITF had to deal with a new team, as the highly-regarded Parolin had been promoted and sent as Nuncio to Venezuela. Parolin's successor, Msgr. Ettore Balestrero, saw the ITF group instead, at what the ITF team expected to be the final meeting before signing an observer agreement. Surprising the ITF, Balestrero also invited a representative from the Vatican Archives, Msgr. Chappin, and the Holy See's chief negotiator for the long-delayed Vatican-Israel Fundamental Agreement, Father David Jaeger.

¶5. (C) All three men, Trauttsmandorff said, evinced considerable discomfort with the idea of ITF observer status. Balestrero argued that the Vatican needed to study the implications of the status further before committing, focusing on legalistic impediments that Parolin had already dismissed. Jaeger was hostile overall to the ITF, Porat said. She fiercely criticized his inclusion, saying he had no role to play in a discussion of the ITF's relationship with the Vatican. XXXXXXXXXXXX Porat said that if Jaeger was so rigid about closer ties with the ITF while Austria held its rotating chair, no progress would be possible next year when Israel chairs the body. Trauttsmandorff was less harsh than his colleague but allowed the Jaeger's involvement in the meeting was not constructive. XXXXXXXXXXXX

Connection to the Papal Archives?

¶6. (C) The three ITF visitors agreed that Chappin, who had previously been more open to dialogue with them, was very defensive at the October 13 meeting. He believed that the ITF would ask the Archives to release ahead of schedule the documents from the papacy of Pius XII, the World War II-era Pope. (Note: The Vatican releases the documents from each pontificate as a whole. End Note) DCM said that Father Norbert Hofmann, Secretary of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, had told her the preceding week that the files from the entire papacy would be ready for declassification in about five years. Katz thought this was far too rosy a

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scenario given that only six-eight researchers are now reviewing the documents. Although this number is up from the one-two working on them a year ago, he thought it was insufficient to catalog and review the 16 million documents from the Pius XII Papacy.

¶7. (C) The ITF members acknowledged their wish to gain access to the Pius XII files as soon as possible. Nevertheless, they also accepted the Vatican's arguments, shared by DCM, that ordained clergy must review them first given the possibility that the files contain confessional documents from individual Catholics. Trauttsmandorff insisted, however, that the ITF sought a relationship with the Vatican not only to get access to the Vatican Archives, but also to work jointly with Catholic Church leaders in many countries on anti-racism and remembrance education.

Now What?

¶8. (C) Despite the disappointment, the ITF members were determined to find a way to move ahead with the Vatican. They concluded that they must now educate new Deputy Foreign Minister Balestrero about the ITF and its role, just as they had done with his predecessor, Parolin. They would also reach out to friends in the Vatican, such as Cardinal Kasper, to exert influence on their behalf. UK DCM indicated that HMG would also express support for ITF goals in discussions with Vatican officials, as did U.S. DCM. The team members left discouraged but committed to keep their eyes on the long-term goal.

Comment

¶9. (C) Unfortunately, the ITF is only the latest group to run into problems caused by the recent change of personnel at the Vatican Foreign Ministry - others, including this embassy (ref B), have experienced similar problems on other issues. What remains to be seen is whether the ITF's problems are the results of Msgr. Balestrero's growing pains or caused by deeper Vatican uneasiness related to declassification of their Archives. The ITF team did not believe the Vatican was sending - via the decision to slow progress on the ITF observer status -- a subtle message to Israel about the need for progress in the Fundamental Agreement talks. Time will tell. DIAZ