

Berlusconi government in predicament over US shooting of Italian journalist

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The right-wing Italian government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was in trouble last week following the March 4 attack by US soldiers on a car carrying freed hostage Giuliana Sgrena to Baghdad airport. US soldiers opened fire on the vehicle wounding Sgrena, a journalist for the leftist *Il Manifesto* newspaper, and killing Nicola Calipari, the Italian intelligence agent responsible for negotiating her release.

The incident provoked immediate outrage in Italy. Hundreds of thousands lined the streets during the state funeral for Calipari, who died shielding Sgrena during the shooting. Small demonstrations took place demanding the immediate withdrawal of Italy's 3,000 troops from Iraq. With polls showing a majority opposed to any involvement in Iraq, the shooting threatened to reignite the broad antiwar movement that brought millions onto the streets in 2003.

In his statement last Wednesday, Berlusconi, one of Bush administration's staunchest European allies, was compelled to walk a fine line. To deflect public anger, he challenged the US account and demanded "maximum collaboration" from Washington "for closure of the incident that was so irrational and that caused so much sorrow." At the same time, he insisted "our friendship with the United States is strong and loyal" and ruled out any withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq.

Berlusconi was helped out of his difficulties by the opposition parties. Significantly, his speech in the Italian Senate was greeted with a standing ovation, not only from his own right-wing supporters, but from the so-called centre-left opposition. Romano Prodi, who heads the opposition Olive Tree alliance, told the media that he appreciated "the tone and measure employed by the prime minister today". It was a clear political signal to Berlusconi that he could count on the opposition not to rock the boat on the issue.

In a speech the previous day to the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini, head of the neo-fascist National Alliance, laid out a similar line. "It is our duty to demand truth and justice," he declared, demanding that "events be clarified... to identify those responsible, and if people are to blame then to request and ensure that the guilty parties are punished."

Berlusconi and Fini both provided details of the March 4 events that are completely at odds with US claims. In a

statement released shortly after the incident, the American military alleged that the vehicle had been travelling at high speed towards a roadblock and had failed to heed warnings including "hand-and-arm signals, flashing white lights and firing warning shots".

Sgrena had previously challenged the US account, saying that the car had not been speeding, there was no roadblock and that the soldiers had opened fire without warning. Drawing on information provided by the second Italian intelligence agent in the car, Fini confirmed her statements.

Fini said that the car had been travelling at no more than 40kph. It slowed because the road was wet and because the driver had to make a sharp turn. Halfway around the curve, a searchlight lit up the vehicle and guns opened fire for 10 to 15 seconds. The second Italian agent, who was driving, got out of the car and was forced to kneel on the road. According to Fini, after realising who the agent was, the two young US soldiers repeatedly apologised for what had happened.

Last Friday US embassy official Robert Callahan conceded that the US soldiers were not part of a regular road block, but were a "mobile checkpoint". It had been set up to provide extra protection for US Ambassador John Negroponte, who was travelling to "Camp Victory" near the airport for dinner with the US commander in Iraq, General George Casey. Negroponte was due at the US headquarters at 7.30 p.m. Why the soldiers were still there at 8.55 p.m., when Calipari was shot, has not been explained.

Fini and Berlusconi also contested US statements that American officials had not been told that Calipari was heading to the airport. Fini said that Calipari, a top Italian agent who had previously been involved in hostage negotiations in Iraq, had made "all necessary contacts" with Italian and US officials. Fini acknowledged, however, that Calipari had not informed US officials of the purpose of his trip, insisting Italy was a "sovereign state".

Calipari had arrived in Iraq on the day of the shooting to consummate a deal for the release of Sgrena. While Fini made no mention of a ransom, several Italian ministers have strongly hinted that money was involved. Calipari met up with a middleman who led him to a parked car in which Sgrena was bound and blindfolded. He transferred Sgrena to his own

vehicle and immediately headed for the airport. Calipari made at least two phone calls—one to the head of the Italian intelligence agency SISMI in Rome and another to an Italian official at the airport. Some 30 minutes later, the car was attacked just 700 metres from the airport.

In his written statement to Rome's Public Prosecutor's office, Italian General Mario Marioli, deputy commander of coalition forces in Iraq, provided further evidence that American authorities had been kept in the dark. According to extracts published in *La Repubblica*, Calipari, who worked in close collaboration with Berlusconi's office, specifically instructed Marioli not to inform US officials of the purpose of the visit.

Shortly before the shooting, Marioli asked SISMI's chief in Baghdad, whether he should inform US authorities that Sgrena was on the way to the airport. "I was told 'No,' notwithstanding that I let him know that a failure to advise them could signify waiting 15 minutes at the checkpoint at the entry to the airport." The US military was told that Calipari and his fellow agent were on the way to the airport but not the identity of their passenger.

These admissions are extraordinary. Berlusconi insists that he is Bush's closest ally and yet when it comes to freeing an Italian hostage in Iraq, the US is told as little as possible. The obvious question is why. The only possible explanation is that Berlusconi and SISMI feared that, in one way or another, the US would interfere with the operation. Washington has previously objected to any negotiations with hostage takers.

The fact that Rome did not trust Washington only highlights a glaring contradiction in the statements of Berlusconi and Fini. While demanding that Washington carry out a full investigation of the incident, the Italian government has ruled out in advance the possibility that the attack on Sgrena was deliberate. Fini was adamant that "it was certainly an accident, an accident caused by a series of circumstances and coincidences". He dismissed as "groundless" the suggestion made by Sgrena that the US military may have targeted the car because Washington opposed Italian negotiating methods.

Considerable political pressure has been brought to bear on Sgrena to withdraw her allegation. Italy's Justice Minister Roberto Castelli rebuked the journalist last week declaring: "Giuliana Sgrena has created enormous problems for this government and has caused grief that would have better been avoided." In the US press, her words have been deliberately distorted and attacked.

In an interview on Sunday in the London-based *Times*, Sgrena continued to insist that the attack was not simply a blunder. "This was an ambush. No sign was given for us to stop. We were going at a normal speed and we were fired at. The most important person on board was not me, it was Nicola. I don't know what happened, but it's impossible to classify this as just an accident."

Her comments point to obvious unanswered questions. If, as

Berlusconi and Fini say, the car was travelling at no more than 40kph, there was no roadblock and no warnings were given, then why did the US soldiers fire at all? There are only two possibilities: either the US troops were jittery, inexperienced or just plain trigger happy, or the attack was a deliberate ambush aimed at scaring or killing the occupants of the car.

Responding to Sgrena's comments last week, White House spokesman Scott McClellan declared: "I think it's absurd to make any suggestion that our men and women in uniform deliberately targeted innocent civilians. That's just absurd." Firstly, it is evident that those who are directly to blame are not "men and women in uniform", but those who give the orders. If Sgrena or Calipari were deliberately targeted, then the decision, which had political consequences for relations with a close ally, would have been made at the highest levels of the US military and intelligence.

The real absurdity is McClellan's contention that the military would never target innocent civilians. Immediately prior to her kidnapping, Sgrena was interviewing refugees from Fallujah, much of which was levelled during the US offensive last year to end anti-American resistance in the city of 300,000. If Sgrena was targeted, it would not be the first time that journalists critical of US militarism have been attacked. During the initial invasion, for instance, US warplanes bombed the offices of the Al Jazeera in Baghdad, even though the Pentagon had been informed of its precise location.

Based on the evidence available to this point, it is not possible to determine if the attack on Sgrena's car was premeditated or not. Even if Washington's explanation was accepted at face value, it simply underscores the fact that US troops confront such hostility in Iraq that they have adopted a policy of shoot first and ask questions later—with tragic consequence for unknown numbers of Iraqi men, women and children. The responsibility rests with the White House, and its allies like Berlusconi, for the illegal and brutal occupation of the country.



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