

WikiLeaks: Fallout is more dribble than storm, say Vatican officials

VATICAN CITY - WikiLeaks' release of classified U.S. documents is unlikely to ever develop into a flood capable of eroding decades of U.S. diplomatic efforts, some Vatican officials and watchers said.

The content of the communications between the U.S. government and its diplomatic missions abroad does "not seem capable of substantially changing relations between the United States" and its 274 embassies around the world, said the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, the day after the WikiLeaks website launched "Cablegate" Nov. 28.

Among the quarter of a million alleged diplomatic cables WikiLeaks said it would release over the coming months, sources in Rome said 850 documents concern communications between the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican.

While U.S. government employees would not comment on any of the content that is being released, the Vatican seemed to be downplaying the perceived crisis and showed a heavy dose of skepticism.

For one thing, the Vatican has made no plans to make any preemptive statements, according to one Vatican source, especially since the authenticity of the leaked documents cannot be verified.

A longtime Vatican diplomat, Cardinal Giovanni Cheli, told Catholic News Service Dec. 2, "First it's necessary to see if these documents are authentic. What proof is there?"

On the other hand, the storm already seemed to be dying down just a few days after the start of the leaks, he said.

"After the early alarm, people aren't taking much notice anymore, at least not in the countries that have already been mentioned in some revelation," he said.

When the clouds lift, he said, “I think, in the end, nothing will have happened.”

Miguel Diaz, the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, told CNS in an e-mail response to questions, “Regardless of the release of alleged reports, we will continue to work with the Vatican to advance shared interests such as international peace and security, human rights, religious freedom, global health and many other priorities.”

The WikiLeaks’ site said one of the many reasons it wanted to make the classified government documents public was to show citizens what is going on behind closed doors.

Cablegate, in fact, reopened an ethical dilemma: What is the proper balance between guaranteeing the public’s right-to-know and protecting the common good, privacy and national security?

Diaz said, “Diplomats, like journalists, doctors, attorneys and many other professions rely on confidential communications in order to do their job. Confidentiality is not unique to diplomacy, and it does not necessarily conflict with the public interest.”

“We believe our friends and allies understand the need for frank, internal discussions and share our view that the release of these documents is reprehensible,” the U.S. ambassador wrote, adding that the U.S. government had already improved on securing sensitive information and remains committed to guaranteeing confidentiality.

Cardinal Cheli, who served as a Vatican diplomat for 36 years, working in Guatemala, Spain, Italy and at the United Nations, said there should be transparency in everything that is of public concern as long as the information would not have negative effects on the public good.

“However, some government documents could have bad consequences if published. That is why there are state secrets in every government in the world,” Cardinal Cheli said.

Another Vatican diplomat, who asked that his name not be used, told CNS that people need to consider what the real role of diplomacy is.

“Is it to complicate things” by never allowing people to speak in confidentiality or have frank honest discussions, “or is it to really try to push the right things across the board” by basing negotiations on a solid and well-research understanding of reality on the ground? he asked.

Massimo Franco, author of a respected book on U.S.-Vatican relations, “Parallel Empires,” told CNS that the balance is tipping decidedly away from secrecy and heavily toward the public’s right-to-know, even at the cost of privacy rights and national security.

The WikiLeaks phenomenon “could be very useful because it forces every serious institution to prepare a legal framework for this new phenomenon of lawlessness,” he said.

“The problem is nobody tends to consider (the leaked material) a secret” that should be protected, he said.

Franco likened WikiLeaks’ extensive information grab to the California Gold Rush in the mid-1880s where “there were no boundaries and the first to occupy the land could keep it.” Slowly, laws aimed at bringing order and justice to the chaos were enacted, he said.

“It’s the same for WikiLeaks, there are no boundaries” on the Internet and people are laying claim to things that don’t necessarily belong to them, he said.

“The right of the public to know is very important, but is this news really something that will enrich public knowledge or will it cause more damage to the institutions?” And who decides? Is it done on an international level or country by country? he asked.

While the actual content of the WikiLeaks’ dossier concerning the Vatican had not yet been released as of Dec. 3, the Italian newspaper, La Stampa, got 18 documents from the U.S. Department of State by making a request through the Freedom of Information Act. Some of the correspondence concerned an assessment by the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican about the conclave and election of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.

The content didn't reveal much more than what people already knew: that many Americans had placed their papal bets on a cardinal from Latin America and that the election of the 78-year-old German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was "a surprise for many."

Franco said a more fascinating find would be the correspondence pertaining to the United States and the Vatican establishing formal relations in 1984.

"It would be interesting from a political and historical point of view to know when exactly and how it was decided to have full diplomatic relations," he said.