'MODERN-DAY BORGIA' BLAMED FOR VATICAN PLOT

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World

Bulgarians 'shot refugee' after forcing him back over border

Bulgaria

Emma Thomas, May Bulman

Bulgaria has been accused of shooting a refugee trying to reach the EU, after video emerged of a Syrian man being fired at on the border with Turkey.

The video, taken by asylum seekers in October, shows the moment a young refugee is hit and seriously injured by a bullet fired from the Bulgarian border, while he is on the Turkish side. It is the first video of an asylum seeker being shot with live ammunition on an EU border and will put pressure on Bulgaria to prove it is complying with human rights law before a vote on it joining the Schengen visa-free area.

The country's interior ministry says more than 150,000 people have attempted to cross the Turkish border this year, more than three times the number in 2021.

A joint investigation by The Times, Lighthouse Reports, Sky News, Le Monde, SRF, Domani, RTE/RTÉ, Bulgarian Service and ARD has found that the shots were fired from the Bulgarian side of the border at unarmed refugees.

The victim, Abdullah al-Iftarium Mohammad, 19, had attempted to cross the border many times. On October 3, he and a group of friends walked for about six hours into Bulgaria before police arrested them and returned them to the border, he said. After they were returned to Turkey, some of the men in the group protested at their treatment.

A confrontation led to refugees throwing stones over the fence. In response, the Bulgarian authorities began firing their weapons.

"They shot twice in the air and after that, they started shooting right in front of us on the ground," Mohammad said. "After that, they hit me by shooting me directly."

He was taken to a hospital in Kirklareli after falling unconscious. According to a medical report, the bullet passed through his hand and entered his chest, lodging 6cm from his heart.

Bulgaria said its officers were present at the scene of the shooting but denied that shots were fired from its territory.

Jelena Sesar, of Amnesty International, said the findings pointed to "potentially very troubling behaviour" by Bulgaria. "Police should only ever use lethal force as a last resort."

Revolt against young priest's sermons on short skirts

Spain

David Sharrock Madrid

The arrival of Father Vicent Planells, a fresh-faced priest in his first post since taking holy orders, was initially welcomed as an injection of youthful vitality for ageing parishioners in Alfafar dels Tarongers.

However, the 1,200 residents of the sleepy Spanish town just north of Valencia have turned against their young priest after the 34-year-old was accused of using the pulpit to preach hate, justifying domestic violence as a means to "educate" women, describing homosexuality as a disease, and criticising women for wearing short skirts.

Older churchgoers, who recall the days of the dictatorship, when the Church's word was law and priests ruled their parishes with an iron rod, are as outraged as younger members of the faith. "We are not going to allow him to live in the 18th century," a pensioner said.

The revolt in Alfafar dels Tarongers has been building ever since the arrival of Planells a year ago, but finally reached boiling point when the council issued a statement condemning his remarks and declaring a boycott of his church. A motion carried unanimously by all political parties in the town hall explained the decision.

It said Planells had, at the "feet of the altar", made attacks on "different vulnerable groups". It added: "We want to show our support for all the parishioners who have decided to stop attending masses due to the repeated hateful messages that are preached and to support all the people and groups to those who have been offended."

Hilberto Prats, a councillor for the conservative Popular Party and former mayor of Alfafar, said: "I have gone to 95 per cent of the masses, and the words that the priest has said have not been distorted or invented, they have been textual.

"He said that he did not bless homosexuals or prostitutes, nor those who go drinking in parks or use drugs ... Never in my life had I heard solemn barbarities like treating a woman in educator. You cannot use the pulpit to insult."

A young woman called Cruz who was recently married by the priest said: "I am a parishioner and have always gone to church, but I stopped after a sermon that he gave to some children who were going to take their first communion.

"He began to speak of homosexuals as an aberration, they had to be removed from circulation. That made me angry. Not even the Old Testament says it."

Maite Pérez, the town's socialist mayor, said that dozens of parishioners had complained to the regional church authorities, appealing for them to rein in the fiery young priest or remove him.

Planells has declined to comment publicly, but told the town council in a statement that he denied the complaints and that he was available "to listen and to be heard ... for the good of the entire town, but for my own, even though it is my person which is ... the object of insults and slander".

When approached by a television news camera crew, all he would say was: "We are in the hands of God." However, the Archidiocese of Valencia said that he "denies the words that have been put in his mouth". The priest, it added, has been "misrepresented".

Francesca Chaouqui is said to have sent a message to a witness in the trial of Angelo Becciu, below

'Modern-day Borgia' blamed for Vatican plot

A fraud trial at the Vatican has taken a dramatic twist amid claims that a woman branded a latter-day Lucrezia Borgia blackmailed a witness into making allegations against a cardinal (Tom Kington writes). Magistrates plan to question Francesca Chaouqui, a former financial consultant at the Vatican, after it was alleged she pressured the witness to make claims about Cardinal Angelo Becciu, who is accused of misusing Vatican cash. "I know everything about you," Chaouqui messaged the witness, Father Alberto Perlasca, adding, "I forgive you Perlasca, but remember, you owe me favour." Becciu, a former senior Vatican official, is one of ten people facing trial following an investigation of a church investment into luxury property in Chelsea which lost millions of euros. Perlasca was involved in the deal but avoided a trial by becoming a star witness, blaming colleagues including Becciu of wrongdoing. Chaouqui was given a ten-month suspended sentence by the Vatican court in 2016 for leaking secrets. She was once likened by Pope Francis to the 15th-century poisoner Lucrezia Borgia. Becciu' s lawyers said that the claims she advised Perlasca was "proof that when Cardinal Becciu heard of the accusations made against him in July 2021 and spoke of shadowy plots against him, he was telling the truth". Perlasca told the court he initially believed the advice given to him by a family friend, Genevieve Ciferri, came from a magistrate, not Chaouqui. The court turned down a request to suspend the trial and now plans to question Ciferri and Chaouqui. Chaouqui said she was unable to comment on the claims made in court.

Family lets them strum like Marie Antoinette for €80,000

France

Charles Bremner Paris

A guitar gifted by King Louis XVI to Queen Marie Antoinette is to be sold at auction this week after two centuries in the family of a lady-in-waiting with whom she performed at Versailles.

The finely-decorated instrument, made by Jacques-Philippe Michelot, a Paris luthier, in 1775, was given to Louise Elisabeth de Lostanges, marquise de la Rochelambert, a friend who played and sang with Antoinette in the Petit Trianon, a neoclassical château in Versailles.

Made of spruce and rosewood and inlaid with mahogany and ivory, the instrument has been preserved in the country home of the Rochelambert family since the marquise bequeathed it to a nephew on her death in 1835.

"This instrument is absolutely sublime. The refinement of its decoration is extraordinary and its state of conservation is remarkable," Grégoire de Thoury, of the Agnès auction house, told Le Parisien newspaper.

The sale price is estimated at up to €80,000. Interest is expected to come from state museums, including Versailles, as well as from private collectors. The possessions of the guillotined queen have been fetching large sums.

Court memoirs from the 1780s record the operas and concerts at which Marie-Antoinette performed with de Lostanges, who was her own age and was lady-in-waiting to Princess Adélaïde de France, the king's aunt. The Austrian-born queen, an accomplished pianist and harpist, turned her hand to the guitar, which was in vogue.

The instrument on sale originally had five strings and was adapted to the modern six-string design early in the 19th century. Invited to a concert in his honour in 1784, King Gustav III of Sweden commented that Marie-Antoinette "sings very well for a queen". She was executed in 1793, aged 37, nine months after her husband Louis XVI.

The guitar, inlaid with mahogany and ivory, is made of spruce and rosewood