

Four arrested in plot to poison water

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ROME — Italian police were investigating today whether the US Embassy in Rome was the object of a plot to poison the city's water, a scheme uncovered with the arrest of four Moroccans in possession of large quantities of the deadly poison cyanide.

Media reports said today that the suspects had maps of Rome highlighting the city's water supply and the US Embassy building.

Police said they suspect the men, arrested early Tuesday in an outlying suburb as part of a covert operation, could have been plotting to poison the city's water or attack the embassy. They are probing possible links to Osama bin Laden, the Arizona Republic reported.

Reuters news service reported that Italy entered the international spotlight in the fight against bin Laden after US investigators said they believed Milan's Islamic cultural center was al Qaeda's main European logistics base. Muslim leaders in Italy have denied the charge.

Those arrested were found with about 10 pounds of cyanide and charts of Rome's water network and about 100 counterfeit resident permits, police said. At least two of the men were illegal immigrants, the newspaper said. The four Moroccans, aged 30 to 40, had been followed by police for days and their detention was related to the arrest of three more Moroccans last week, police said in the newspaper report.

"The embassy of the United States of America compliments the Italian police and security forces for their excellent work concerning the most recent security threat," said a statement from US officials, the newspaper reported. Police chiefs and Italy's leading anti-terrorist prosecutors, who were meeting behind closed doors Wednesday, told reporters that leaks regarding the case may have already caused irreparable damage, the newspaper reported. The Moroccan embassy said it would only comment after Italy confirmed the identities of the men arrested, the article said.

The US embassy, prominently located on Rome's famed Via Veneto, has been a suspected target for attack on several occasions in recent months, the newspaper reported. Even before the 11 September terrorist attacks, the embassy was forced to shut for three days after an intelligence warning of a possible bombing. Following the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, the State Department warned again that American symbols in Italy could be targets.

Seven Tunisians are on trial in Milan as part of a crackdown on groups suspected of having ties to bin Laden and his al Qaeda network. They are also suspected of plotting an attack on the U.S. embassy in January 2001, according to the newspaper report.

[return to News Page](#)
