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John Paul II gunman lays flowers at Vatican tomb

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

VATICAN CITY — The Turkish gunman who shot and wounded John Paul II in 1981 laid white flowers Saturday on the saint's tomb in St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican officials said.

The surprise visit by

Mehmet Ali Agca, believed to be his first time in the Vatican since the assassination attempt, lasted a few minutes, a Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Cino Benedetti, said. As with other flowers left by visitors to the tomb, the blossoms were later removed

by basilica workers. Benedetti said there are no legal matters pending against Agca in the Vatican and he was free to visit. Agca's trip came on the 31st anniversary of his meeting with the pope.

John Paul, who forgave his attacker, visited

Agca in a Rome prison on Dec. 27, 1983, and later intervened to gain Agca's release in 2000. Agca was extradited to Turkey for the 1979 killing of a Turkish journalist and he completed a 10-year sentence there in 2010.

When Agca was apprehended after shooting

the pontiff in St. Peter's Square during a public audience, the Turk said he acted alone. Later he suggested Bulgaria, and the Soviet secret services masterminded the attack on the Polish-born pontiff, whose championing

of the Polish Solidarity labor movement alarmed Moscow. Twice, Italian juries acquitted three Bulgarians and three Turks of alleged roles in the shooting. Agca has often given contradictory accounts and has claimed to be a Messiah.

PARADE

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"As far as producing the parade, I wasn't looking at a lot of those one-time expenses, such as utilities," said Joe Vera III, assistant city manager, who organized the parade.

He said he doesn't agree that the \$1.1 million price tag should be in the first-year expense report — even the money spent on improvements along Bicentennial.

"This is an expense that had to occur for this parade to go through this route for years to come," he said.

The water district fees were also an unforeseen surprise.

"They never told us that we would have to go into water district improvement property, so when those permit fees came up, that was an additional cost that we never even considered," he said.

Even if none of the site work or utilities are included in the expenses, the materials, artwork, props, balloons, celebrities, printed promotional banners and even meals for city employees working on the floats, accounted for around \$381,000 — more than double the \$185,000 budgeted in the city's 2014-15 financial breakdown for "city annual parade improvements."

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS
Vera countered that the true economic impact of the event is still to come, and that the University of Texas Pan American will be contracted to gather estimates for a report in January, while the final budget is being compiled by the city.

The goal from day one was that we produce a des-

ignation type of event that's going to draw people to Midland from South Texas and Mexico," he said, adding that he wants to "grow" the event for next year, with more bleacher seating, trash cans, celebrities and even a call for volunteers.

Commissioner John Ingram, one of the parade's critics, even conceded the parade's success. "I must say the parade was spectacular on a public relations standpoint," said Ingram, who congratulated city staff on the production.

Yet, he had concerns about the breakdown of the ramp-up and its sizeable budget.

"I was thinking that maybe in a few years we could build a new parade, because I know it would be expensive and believe that other budgetary issues should have been addressed first, one being our city employees."

Ingram added that he did vote for improvements along Bicentennial, but there was no break-down for each individual float.

The sponsorship was critical to the parade, said Salinas, about local and national businesses that stepped up to the plate, including The Monitor. "We are very appreciative that they saw this as a worthy investment in the community for the public."

He did acknowledge the budget was stretched beyond its initial projection, but said the parade was



The Muppets' Animal balloon passes by a crowd Dec. 5 during the McAllen Holiday Parade.

a hit and resources were well spent.

"We will make our best concerted effort in keeping the costs down and we are aware of our responsibility for the minimal cost as can be had for a parade of that magnitude," she said.

But massive helium balloons like Kermit the Frog, longy fish and Santa Claus aren't cheap.

More than \$60,000 was spent on prop and balloon rentals from Southwest Parades, an entertainment company based in San Antonio for the 16 balloon floats.

The secret to the illuminated floats and more than a dozen marching bands with glow-in-the-dark instruments and uniforms was \$34,000 spent on light-emitting diode, or LED, lights.

More than \$71,500 was spent to draw celebrity guests like Cissela Olvera, the San Juan native and ABC television show actress, who was paid \$15,000 for a

three-hour commitment.

But the message of one episode of her TV series titled "Total Pay" — about a lawsuit by a woman who alleged she was discriminated against and underpaid compared to her male counterpart — was a long time in real life.

Her fellow host Mario Lopez took home \$16,500 — paid to Uptown Casting, an entertainment booking company out of San Antonio.

Willow Shields, a Mexican journalist who was invited to the event, was paid \$11,000 and Mane de la Parra made \$10,000 while Caroline Serwine was paid \$8,000 and \$3,500 for female Cruz Cordova, or Mando from So-

me Street, according to the linked contracts. There was no contract available for Maria Antoniera Collins, a Mexican journalist who was invited to the event.

Blaine Kern Studios, based in New Orleans, was paid \$49,500 for float and prop rentals — the same company used for one of the consultants that worked on the parade.

Another consultant, Jean McFadden, a former Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade director, was given about \$2,000 for her services to estimate the number of attendees, according to city officials.

FLOAT BUILDERS
Under the hood of the gitty and glamorous holiday parade and low-key Candlelight Procession, dozens of Parks and Recreation employees worked — some of them pulling 12-hour shifts — welding, sawing and constructing 40 floats in hopes of bringing smiles to the faces of area children, records show.

"There's a lot of talent from the staff here," Mike Hernandez, deputy director of Parks and Recreation, said about the nearly 70 employees that were involved in building the floats in a warehouse owned by South Texas College — some of which were from scratch.

"We had plywood, so we said let's make Spongebob

and we had a few crates that they used as models for Patrick," said Hernandez about the opportunity to change the color, it doesn't have to be Lighting McQueen all the time," he quipped about another cartoon character from the popular Disney film Cars.

Photos of the lights, celebrity appearances and marching bands glowing through the dark night may live on through social media, but city-sponsored parties came with a cost: the public will pay — even if it draws a crowd, like the 800,000 reported by city officials.

But not every parade needs a huge investment to draw a crowd. City of Edinburg officials reported between 40,000 and 50,000 attendees and spent only \$2,000 for its annual holiday parade, \$2,000 of which came from the Edinburg Chamber of Commerce, as it's been for the past 15 years.

The City of Pharr spent only \$1,500 on man-made snow and about \$2,500 on carnival rides for children, but didn't use any other outside vendors for the parade.

"We wish the best of luck to McAllen. This is the season of giving, but our intent was to retain the hometown flavor," Pharr spokesman Gary Rodriguez said about the 40 illuminated floats handmade by residents, local businesses, and even city departments.

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LA POSADA

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In August, the shelter welcomed its 8,000th client during a surge of immigrants arriving in the Rio Grande Valley, many of them from Central America. Since its opening almost 20 years ago, the shelter has served clients from more than 70 countries.

Earlier this year, the shelter saw a spike in clients as more families in Central America began fleeing from increasing violence.

"These families are fleeing from violent gangs who threaten their lives and the takeover of their homes," Sister Zita Tellez, the shelter's program director, said of the influx from Central America. "Trying to find a safe place for their children, they abandon families, friends and everything they love and have to embark on perilous journeys to seek refuge in the United States."

La Posada Provisoria is one of 15 organizations benefiting from ADM Texas Charities' inaugural campaign to raise funds

for the hungry, homeless and those in need of basic essentials in the Valley. ADM Media Texas is the parent company of the Valley Morning Star, Brownsville Herald and Monitor.

The shelter is where Saba and her family found refuge and help adjusting to a new life away from their home.

She says her journey began because of civil unrest in her country. At the time of her husband's arrest, she said, she and her two daughters, Sarah, 11, and Johanna, 5, were chased and intimidated by Eritrean government officials.

The U.S. government has no problems with human rights in Eritrea. According to the U.S. Department of State's 2013 Human Rights Report, the most recent available, "The most significant human rights problems included: restrictions on freedom of expression and association, including through arrests; detention; politically motivated violence; harassment; and intimidation of opposition members and journalists..."



Saba took on as her daughters Sarah, 11, and Johanna, 5, wait and down in their notebooks at La Posada Provisoria in San Benito.

Saba said she feared that she could be jailed or killed at any time. So she took her daughters and fled the country with the little money she had.

they over to the care of the San Benito-based shelter.

At La Posada they do more than provide safe shelter; they help ensure their clients' success. While their cases progress through the courts, they help them prepare for life in this country and provide emotional support when needed.

Like Saba, clients often arrive at La Posada with very few possessions, limited or no English language skills and no friends or family to help them.

The shelter works with clients to help them integrate more quickly into U.S. culture and makes every effort to meet the needs of their clients, who are at first a very vulnerable group of people, shelter workers say.

La Posada's services include shelter, food, English language classes, life skills classes, access to computers, the Internet, email and individual case management.

On the second day that they are here, they are enrolled in English classes, it's a requirement, Telkamp said.

The staff of La Posada helps each client to ensure

they get the necessary legal aid, health care, social services and other education assistance.

La Posada also provides door-to-door transportation to doctors, dentists, lawyers' offices and immigration offices.

Staff members say they help clients become familiar with the values, customs and social practices typical in the United States, including currency, personal finance and employment practices.

Saba said she and her children are adjusting well to their new life. But, for more than a year, she has not seen or heard from her husband. "We remain hopeful that he will someday contact her."

"If he gets out he will try to contact me," she said.

For now she has no way of knowing if he is still alive. Within the next few months Saba and her children will move on to another shelter update.

"We will always see that clients get to the next step," Telkamp said.

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JOBS

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"Too deeply grateful to the Railroad Commission for the opportunity to continue in public service for the people of Texas in an agency so vital to protecting the public, our natural resources and our economic success."

Directors at the Parks and Wildlife Department, the Health and Human

Services Commission and the state water board, among other agencies, are former Perry people.

John Fastner, chief of staff for Gov. Ann Richards, said the jobs can be a reward for loyalty.

"The bigger problem is, are you taking positions that could be filled by people who have worked their way up," said Becky Motal, a former general manager for the Lower Colorado

River Authority who now runs a consulting firm.

State law requires any agency that has an "opening for which persons from outside the agency will be considered" shall list the opening with the Texas Workforce Commission.

"But the newspaper's review shows state agencies frequently don't comply or don't open the jobs for competition."

According to the news-

paper, that's what happened with the Health and Human Services Commission's hiring of Casey Hane, Jessica Olson and Jay Kimbrough to jobs that pay more than \$130,000 annually. Hane and Olson were Perry budget and policy aides.

Kimbrough was Perry's chief of staff.

"We selected highly qualified individuals for new jobs where the person

needed to hit the ground running," commission spokeswoman Stephanie Goodman said. "While our selections were good, our process was not."

Over the past two years, the Texas Workforce Development Board has hired at least seven former employees from Perry's office, six of the jobs weren't posted. Agency spokeswoman Merry Klotzner said the people were

hired during a legislative-ordered reorganization, meaning the board could bypass the usual process.

Larry Lynn, who teaches public administration at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, said the effect is an agency "perpetuated by cronies of the powerful, and that can affect the quality with which laws are enforced and the allocations for enforcement."