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Mafia Trial of 466 in Sicily Begins Deliberations

By ROBERTO SURO, Special to the New York Times
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After hearing testimony and arguments for 21 months, a Palermo jury began deliberations today in the largest Mafia trial ever conducted, weighing charges against 466 defendants, who are said to include some of Sicily's top underworld bosses.

A verdict in the "maxi-trial," as it is known, is expected around Christmas. Even though prosecutors expect convictions against the men they say built the Mafia into a worldwide drug empire, law enforcement officials are expressing concern that a new generation of Mafia bosses is responsible for a resurgence of violence and heroin trafficking in the Sicilian capital.

Two judges and six jurors were sequestered this morning in a specially built complex on the grounds of Ucciardone Prison in Palermo. The deliberations will take place in a room equipped with two computer systems to help in sifting through testimony from 1,314 witnesses that has been reduced to 25,000 pages of summaries.

The most important evidence in the trial, which began Feb. 10, 1986, came from a dozen admitted Mafia members who testified for the state, including a former boss, Tomasso Buscetta, who has also appeared in New York Mafia trials.

Prosecutors asked for life sentences for 28 defendants reputed to be Mafia leaders and a total of 4,675 years in jail terms for 389 other defendants. Prosecutors did not seek guilty verdicts for the remaining 49 defendants.

Since June about a dozen murders apparently linked to Mafia activities have convinced the police that "something significant is happening inside the organization, although we only have hypotheses about what it is," said Judge Giovanni Falcone, one of the top Mafia investigators in Palermo. In addition, recent arrests have convinced Judge Falcone and others that substantial heroin shipments are again passing through Sicily, after dropping off as most of the defendants in the trial were rounded up in 1984.

While informers like Mr. Buscetta were said to have provided the authorities with a complete description of Mafia activities, that information is now at least three years old, and no comparable information is available on current activities.

The apparent resumption of Mafia activities has led to jokes about Ucciardone Prison serving as a retirement home for the Mafia, since the current leaders are unknown and at large. This impression has been reinforced by seeming personality changes in two men accused of being among the most brutal Mafia bosses. Luciano Liggio, who is already serving a life sentence for murder, has taken up painting quaint scenes of life in his hometown of Corleone. Michele Greco, known as "the Pope" because of his predominance among other bosses, has taken to making declarations of religious faith in the courtroom where he has heard testimony that he ordered 76 murders. Scope of Case Criticized

Defense lawyers and some legal experts have criticized the scope of the prosecution's case, which charged that the defendants were part of one vast criminal conspiracy. Many of the defendants were simply charged with belonging to a criminal organization.

"This was a trial against a broad historical phenomenon," said Salvatore Gallina Montana, who represents several defendants. "Now the jurors must judge people as individuals, and I fear that is going to be an impossible task after this kind of proceeding."

Interviewed recently in Palermo, the lawyer said that if the jurors deliberated for six weeks as expected and worked 10 hours a day every day, they would only have time to spend an average of less than one hour on each defendant.

Justice Minister Giuliano Vassali very delicately criticized the trial last month by saying, "I think we all realize that a maxi-trial is only one of the tools available for fighting the Mafia and that there are others."

Defense lawyers focused their efforts on trying to point out contradictions in informers' testimony. All the defendants entered pleas of innocent. By ROBERTO SURO ROME, Nov. 11 - After hearing testimony and arguments for 21 months, a Palermo jury began deliberations today in the largest Mafia trial ever conducted, weighing charges against 466 defendants, who are said to include some of Sicily's top underworld bosses.

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"The Mafia is constantly evolving, and we have to constantly try to keep up with it," Judge Falcone said. "There is no way for us to be as informed about recent crimes as we are about things we have investigated for years."

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Justice Minister Giuliano Vassali delicately criticized the trial at a major conference on criminal justice last month by saying, "I think we all realize that a maxi-trial is only of the tools available for fighting the Mafia and that there are others."

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