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Playing with Ebola

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Craig Shaw, Lorenzo Bagnoli and Lorenzo Bodrero * (text)

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The story of an Italian who was appointed itinerant ambassador of São Tomé, the country's special envoy to the UN and presented a € 2.5 billion project to the world to help African countries affected by the epidemic. And as everything was just a lie (with mafia and tax havens in between)



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The photo records a historic moment for the people of São Tomé and Príncipe. Taken at the end of May 2012, it shows a 49-year-old man dressed in the general uniform of the Corpi Sanitari Internazionali, a non-military derivation of the French Foreign Legion. Respectfully seated in front of the President of São Tomé, Manuel Pinto da Costa, he has just been introduced as the new itinerant ambassador and special envoy to the United Nations.

It is the country's first diplomatic mission to the UN in New York since independence in 1975.

But the man personally chosen by Costa to represent the country's 200,000 citizens abroad is not a veteran statesman, a prominent politician or even a native of the islands. It is Angelo Antonio Toriello, a white man of Italian-French nationality, with no diplomatic or political experience.

Few São Toméans would be in a position to say how Toriello ended up in that room that day. In a mysterious act of faith, Costa had signed a presidential decree in secret three months



could have provided answers about how Toriello had made such high political connections.

Before his new and inexplicable career as a diplomat in West Africa, Toriello seems to have been jumping from one enterprise to another, accumulating an eclectic history as a bar owner, investigative journalist, spectacle artist, Franciscan friar, founder of holistic religious groups and researcher dedicated to helping “grieving parents ... to talk to their broken children”. Two master's degrees and a doctorate are also available. If Toriello was embarrassed by his appointment, it was not the idea that came up. From his New York office, he began to employ friends in key places - essentially other Italians, essentially white. Among them, the new coordinator, dr. Sebastiano Lauritano, and the head of his Italian office, Amerigo Festa, a lawyer and president of the Human Beings Project,

One of the hallmarks of the latter's mandate over four years has been a campaign to impose his version of spiritual diplomacy. He supported the International Yoga Day of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as well as the United Nations International Day of Happiness, and created his own initiative - 'Humanicia', “The Human Side of Diplomacy” - to use “heightened awareness of art” to promote “peace and global development”.

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But the ambassador's most notable achievement was a billions-of-dollar aid project for West Africa, announced at the Stop Ebola and Build for the Future concert that took place in February last year at the UN General Assembly.

The initiative was designed to finance much-needed things like hospitals, health facilities, equipment, housing, infrastructure and aid to business start-ups in West African countries hard hit by the current Ebola epidemic.

After a few months, however, the project quietly disappeared without explanation.

Although Toriello never admitted it publicly, the deal was canceled due to the decision to award a non-competitive contract to a company run by a man who was once convicted of laundering money from the mafia.

THE EBOLA CONCERT

The Ebola crisis began with the death of a two-year-old Guinean boy named Emile Ouamouno. He contracted an unknown disease on December 4, 2013 and died a few days later, after fatally contaminating his mother, grandmother and three-year-old sister.

Meliandou, the village of Emile, is in the south-west of the country, a region of dense forest that is close to the border with Sierra Leone and Liberia. When the international medical community finally recognized Ebola as the cause of these deaths,



factor that contributed to the epidemic, say experts from the World Health Organization, was that West Africa, having had no reported cases of Ebola before, was ill-equipped to deal with a deadly outbreak of the disease. Years of poverty and “long periods of conflict and instability” have resulted in an absence of adequate disaster response procedures, as well as places to carry out tests and sufficient infrastructure.

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noped to change that.

On February 28, 2015, three years after Costa used his executive wand, Ambassador Toriello was in an almost empty press room at the United Nations offices in New York. Meanwhile promoted to Permanent Vice-Representative, he was the co-sponsor of the Ebola Solidarity Concert, which the General Assembly was to host two days later.

Organized by the Give Them a Hand foundation, the Ambassadors' Friendship Foundation and the African National Congress, the concert hoped to help maintain a global awareness of the health crisis that was happening in Africa, where around 10,000 people had already died and even more children had been orphaned.

In his speech earlier, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon thanked the Sao Tome mission and urged citizens to make financial support commitments to “beat Ebola and help affected countries build for a better future. ”.

That the concert had lost money, it didn't matter. An inspired Toriello and his assistant Lauritano had put the finishing touches on an ambitious multi-million dollar initiative to rebuild “affected countries”.

Positioned with Lauritano in the UN press room, Toriello revealed his grand plan: he and the São Tomé and Príncipe mission were working with several companies on a \$ 2.5 billion assistance project.

“Pintus is a well-known group and they are very important ...”, said Toriello. “They are led by Curio Pintus, a person well known



Italian Prime Minister] Mario Monti .

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"Lauritano worked for a long time to identify this group, which is quite large," he said, before inviting him to give more information.



Pintus were studying the electrical part of the virus, while engaging in research to “reduce the complementary agent that causes Ebola”, the socioeconomic factors that allow it spread so quickly in poor areas.

In the months that followed, Toriello hired a public relations firm to promote his message. In an interview with the Italian news site MondoLibero Online, he filled in some of the gaps. “The financial part will be dealt with in conjunction with the World Bank and the general contractor, which is Grupo Pintus USA”, he said, before adding that the project would be “strictly controlled and supervised by the UN, to guarantee the excellent final result”. He added that he wanted to use the business to “offer opportunities to Italian companies”.

Toriello later claimed that before signing the contract he had never heard of Grupo Pintus and its CEO, Curio Pintus. Of course, if I had taken the time to check, I would have known a lot.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF PINTUS

In 2000, during Operation Hydros, an investigation into the Mafia in Calabria (Italy), a broker called Curio Pintus, in his mid-50s, with gray hair and glasses, admitted to the authorities: “Everyone who worked for me was aware that I performed money laundering activities in my financial group.”

It was an extraordinary confession for a man who had long denied having a criminal past with the Mafia.

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The Hidros trial wiped out Pintus' facade. Prosecutors were able to prove that since the 1980s one of the most powerful criminal groups in the world, the 'Ndrangheta of Calabria, had used Milan's fruit and vegetable markets as a center to traffic billions of dollars in drugs and weapons around the world. At its peak, the operation handled 300 kilograms of narcotics every month, mostly cocaine from South America and heroin from Turkey, generating huge profits. Two 'Ndrangheta clans - Morabito and Bruzzese - orchestrated the scheme, but the undisputed boss was Leo Talia, nephew of the 'Ndrangheta's super chief, Guiseppe Morabito.

Curio Pintus was Talia's money man. Pintus turned profits from drugs and weapons into legal financial bonds, running a sophisticated global money laundering network that involved offshore ghost companies and accounts at some of the world's leading banks. Guardia di Finanzia (Fiscal Guard) described Pintus as the "necessary element" in the venture, linking more than 600 billion illicit funds to its financial operations - 343 million euros in current money.

Pintus was later found guilty, along with several top members of the 'Ndrangheta, and sentenced to three years in prison.



sector as the leader of the Pintus Group LLC, based in Las Vegas, USA.

Describing itself as a “commercial bank, with offices in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Italy, Malta, Hong Kong, India and Africa”, it also claims to work in the Dominican Republic, Panama, Dubai, Thailand, Romania and Serbia.

But the Pintus Group seems to be nothing more than a false, unregulated facade, with a tendency for unsubstantiated deals and strange looking financial documents.

On several occasions, the company has refused to provide evidence that its alleged investment activities had been authorized by state or federal regulators, raising questions about the legality of its venture.

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In more than one case, there were revelations to suggest that Grupo Pintus was routinely involved in the creation of fraudulent contracts and financial instruments.



PINTUS, provided a set of documents that he says were used by the mafia intermediary to attract customers and investors. Dated between July and September 2015, they assume to show 200 million euros in an account at the Bank of Ireland, with a confirmation letter signed by one of the bank's top executives.

But the bank flatly denies having dealt with the company, and says the documents are false.



Characters. Angelo Antonio Toriello and the famous photo with the President of São Tomé, when he was presented as the country's special envoy to the UN. On the previous page, from left to right, Antonio Monti, the mysterious man; Curio Pintus, the money man; Toriello and Lauritano at the UN, at the press conference after the presentation of the project for West Africa





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Pippa Hadley, Head of Communication at the Bank of Ireland, says the bank “is not aware of the transaction as detailed in the email”. “The ‘Confirmation letter’ dated 24 July 2015 is a false document (it was not issued by the Bank of Ireland, it is a fraud).” Adding not having “any knowledge of an entity called Pintus Group LLC” or “any payment of 200 million euros. These funds do not exist ”.

Another document obtained by a whistleblower website in the USA is a draft contract for a development business in Senegal, signed by the vice president for technical affairs, Guerino Nava. The amounts are very high: 200 billion euros for “social and economic development projects”, unspecified.

A Senegalese businessman who was president of the Federation of Customs Officials Associations for West Africa, Madior Bouna Niang, says the Pintus Group asked him to personally deliver the contract to Senegalese President Macky Sall. He refused.

“I didn’t trust them,” he said. “The objective was not clear, so I stopped everything. They said I would have taken the contract to



When asked why Pintus specifically approached him, he says: “I didn't know him before. I have no idea how he found me. ”

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In a phone call, Pintus stated that Nava never signed any contracts, but declined to comment on the origin of the documents and how the Pintus Group managed to obtain such vast amounts of money.

Gan Gaetano Bellavia, a consultant with the Milan Prosecutor's Office and a money laundering specialist, said: “If you read the contract with the numbers and the entities involved, it may well seem like an attempt to launder money. But the amounts and the signatures are hilarious, making such a contract implausible. ”

This judgment was echoed by Burke Files, a fraud investigator and president at Financial Examinations & Evaluations, Inc, who said: “This funding alone, this 200 billion, would have been one of the largest stacks of money in the world. With such amounts, there is no need to advertise on message boards and Facebook, as Pintus



except as a real fraud and a scam ... Grupo Pintus is after the fees associated with the project, between 0.5% and 2% in expenses and taxes. The company should be exposed and judged. ”

Fortunately for Pintus, he did not need such elaborate credentials to withdraw Ebola's lucrative contract. Toriello and his team would offer it exclusively.

THE BUSINESS

Last November, journalists contacted Toriello's office to inquire about the state of the Ebola project, which at that time remained suspiciously unresolved after almost a year. They were told that Pintus's business was too sensitive to be discussed on the phone or by email - it could only be spoken face to face.

During a meeting at a restaurant in Shepherd's Bush (London) two days after Christmas, Toriello was still reluctant to give an explanation of how he and the Sao Tome people had gotten involved with a known con man.

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compensation for himself for having handed over evidence of illegality to the UN, including the contract he signed with Pintus, saying he "had a family to look after".

Although he never received any money, Toriello was right to be concerned about the possible consequences of seeing Pintus's contractual understandings with him and his office exposed to public scrutiny.

He would later explain that, shortly before the concert, an Italian businessman named Antonio Monti had approached his assistant, Lauritano, in his office in Bari, Italy, to promote the Ebola contract.

Monti, who Toriello said had introduced himself as the nephew of former Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, made his proposal at the UN in New York, saying his firm was in a good position to handle the venture's finances. They had branches around the world, and had embarked on similar humanitarian projects before.

Any suspicions that Toriello might have had, including why he was never told the name of the company represented by Monti at that time, were probably dispelled by the prestigious family name, Monti. And the additional enticement of the half-million-dollar pledge to help pay for the Ebola concert shouldn't have hurt either.

When it became clear that the promised donation would never arrive, Toriello had already publicly announced that he had signed a contract with the "well-known" Grupo Pintus. When Ambassador Pintus ended up canceling the contract with Grupo Pintus months later - Curio Pintus claims that he is merely "on



proposal that the funds be kept by the company, and with the potentially fraudulent use of bank codes of Depository & Trust Clearing Corporation (DTCC).

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The DTCC is a conduit for global money movements, and it boasts of handling \$ 1.4 quadrillion annually. It is used by the world's largest financial institutions, such as banks and insurance companies, to protect and resolve transactions.

According to Pintus, the initial plan was to act as the authorized intermediary for the transfer of funds through the DTCC. In return, the company would receive a one percent commission. In a deal valued at 2.5 billion dollars, Pintus would have at least 25 million.

But the Pintus Group does not appear to have access to the DTCC system, which requires a license. Instead, Grupo Pintus would turn to another company, the GOSB Group, a Florida-based firm headed by Arthur Osborn, also known as Arturo Moises Gonzalez Osborne. Osborn and his associates run a number of obscure



legitimate access to DICC codes.

Pintus insisted that he had no business with GOSB, Arthur Osborn, or his small network of popular companies on schema sites on the Internet, although one of his associates was a former director of Pintus & Company UK Ltd in Britain.

Osborn told IRPI in an e-mail that GOSB has no "relationship with the Pintus Group" and that "the United Nations project, with application in several nations within Africa, has been affected by the situation with Muslims / Islamish and their terrorist activities ... [sic] ". He did not respond to requests to clarify his statements.

NAME ON PAPER

The ambassador told reporters that he had never heard of Curio Pintus until his name appeared on the contract. When asked why he signed without checking anything, he replied in a bizarre way: "I am an ambassador. I am not allowed to do due diligence. "

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a facade for Pintus. If he didn't know, he was seriously deceived by those who worked for him.

After the interview in West London, Toriello interrupted his collaboration with this piece, demanding that any further discussions take place in the legal refuge of the United Nations headquarters in New York.

At that time, however, testimony from other sources was beginning to contradict the ambassador's story. In separate interviews, Monti and Lauritano admitted to having a long-standing friendship. Lauritano was said to have been the main instigator to bring Pintus into the business, asking Monti to convince the Mafia banker to join.

Equally worrying is that Lauritano knew about Pintus' criminal reputation, although he lessened the problem, saying that in Italy "the Constitution says that we are innocent until the final decision, like Pintus".

If Lauritano really believed in Pintus's innocence, he must have gotten that idea from himself. Or someone close to him. Pintus was never absolved of his mafia-related financial crimes.

In his responses to questions from journalists about the strange financial maneuvers and his own conviction for money laundering, Pintus said: "I read your fucking message ... and defamatory statements. The information in your possession is false and it can be easily demonstrated and demonstrable that I have never suffered any conviction for money laundering [sic]".



But apparently, it wasn't that easy. Despite repeated requests, Pintus has not provided the evidence that he says will overturn his conviction, preferring to issue a battery of legal threats.

But a third, and final, trial against him was analyzed by three different lawyers, and everyone confirmed that, although he managed to get rid of the "mafia association" charge, he will always be convicted of money laundering.

ALL THE MEN OF PINTUS

In fact, Curio Pintus is not the only criminal in the company. Number two, Stephen Richard Hill, a former lawyer who ran his own New York law firm, Hill & Associates, has at least two convictions, the first about two years after graduating from Brooklyn Law School. In 1971, he was sentenced to one year in jail for his involvement in a stock exchange manipulation scheme in Florida, and in 2012 for stealing \$ 18,000 from his boss. After that, the New York State Bar Association, the regulatory body for lawyers in the state, withdrew his license to practice.



in Italy, where Curio Pinto was tried by mafia association . He was to be acquitted, and although Hill was never tried, court documents said he was "a trusted man in the Gambino mob family in NYC."

Responding to the allegations against Hill, Pintus said that "he never had convictions as you describe" and that he was going to instruct him to "immediately file a complaint against you, he will have to cross the world to save himself from this new defamation [sic]". Hill did not respond to emails, but his criminal record is documented in the NY State Bar Association and in court documents in the United States.

Over the course of several months, the ambassador repeatedly refused to provide a copy of the contract with Pincus. The Government of São Tomé, together with its senior ambassador, Carlos Filomeno Agostinho das Neves, has shown little interest in dealing with the activities of Toriello and Lauritano, which at this time already included threats to journalists and apparent lies to stop the investigation of the story.

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international police operation against Curio Pintos, involving the FBI, Europol, the Italian anti-mafia authorities, the United Kingdom and the British “secret services” of the British.

But if Lauritano is correct, then the aforementioned agencies care little about the exposure. The FBI, Italian anti-mafia authorities and the UN deny that there is any investigation.

Asked to provide some evidence, Lauritano refused, saying to a journalist: “If I go to you, you will be hurt.”

The ethics department at the UN says that the UN has no oversight or jurisdiction over foreign ambassadors or their staff - who, he says, respond only to the respective member country.

The appointment of Toriello by Costa in 2012 disturbed some Sao Tome deputies, according to a government official who asked not to be identified, given his sensitive public position. The decision to overtake parliament was not entirely popular with parliamentarians, who are said to have refused to grant Toriello a diplomatic passport.

There are other reasons to think that Toriello is not suitable for public office. In particular, his (and Lauritano's) lack of academic qualifications.



He likes to call himself a doctor, and says he has a "scientific background" and several advanced degrees. According to his website, paradoxxmedia.net, created in 2011, a few months before his appointment, he has a doctorate in Philosophy of Criminology and a master's in law, both obtained from distance learning programs. It was recently described in this way in the preface to a book entitled "The Psychosocial Aspects of a Deadly Epidemic. What Ebola Taught Us About Holistic Healing ", written by a former radio presenter, " Dr. Judy "Kuriansky, clinical psychiatrist and member of the NGO Psychology Coalition at the United Nations, who is supposed to be a consultant to Toriella.

The dean of Hartford University, where Toriello says he studied in the 1980s, denies that he was ever a student there. He explained to journalists that the institution does not have distance learning programs.

In addition, the 2005 law master's degree is from Dublin Metropolitan University (DMU) - a 'degree factory' run by someone with a conviction for embezzling funds, which was



non-accredited and worthless degrees, especially to foreigners.

Likewise, Lauritano, who Toriello introduced as a doctor at the Ebola Assistance Concert, has no medical qualifications. His degree in homeopathy is not formally recognized, having been awarded by Clayton College of Natural Health in Alabama, a distance learning university specializing in "alternative medicine", which has never been accredited and has already closed.

When Toriello canceled the contract with Pintus, he made no public announcement or made an apology. In private, Toriello rejects any suggestion that his actions have harmed Africans, saying that "they were never betrayed or exploited ... and they did not suffer losses or consequences for my actions".

And so, a multimillion-dollar deal designed to help struggling West African citizens has faded as mysteriously as it had emerged. No official investigation was launched, and no questions answered, about how a group of Italians conspired, through incompetence or corruption, to manipulate a contract in favor of a man like Curio Pintus, destroying a process that could have saved lives. b

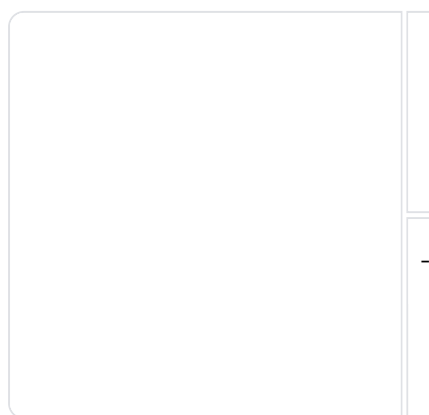
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This investigation was supported by a grant from
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* Translation by Luís M. Faria

Article published in the EXPRESSO edition of 4 July 2016



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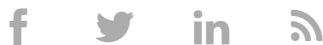


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