

News Policy of Police

Disclosure of Data Adds Pressure, But Seeks to Build Public Confidence

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

On Tuesday evening, the Police Department scheduled a news conference for 10 A.M. yesterday on the near-fatal shooting of Joseph A. Colombo Sr., the reputed Mafia leader. Then, at the last minute yesterday, the conference was called off. "I had a sore throat," Chief of Detectives Albert A. Seedman explained with a grin. "No reason," the department's new press spokesman, Deputy Commissioner Robert Daley, added, smiling slightly.

The conference was awaited with interest because it has been two weeks since the department's announcement—startling for its tone of certainty but spare in its details—that the assassination attempt on Colombo was part of a "detailed" underworld plot. With intriguing references to "hit men" and unnamed Colombo rivals, the police sketched their theory that a young black man, Jerome A. Johnson, was hired to shoot Colombo and was shot to death in turn.

Obviously, a police spokesman replied when asked whether Colombo had fallen into disfavor with his peers.

"Obviously," was the reply again to whether the Colombo assault had the "approval" of other mob "bosses."

Details Awaited

Since those certain replies, there have been no details filling out the police contention about the shootings, which took place in the midst of scores of policemen and of thousands of people gathered for an Italian-American Unity rally on June 28.

Considering the difficulty of attempting to fathom the fabled secrets and intricacies of the underworld, such official silence may be understandable.

However, it coincides with a newly announced police goal of trying to release more information to the public in the course of major investigations. And it occurs, like the other shoe failing to fall, immediately after the confidence exhibited at the police news conference of July 2.

Immediately after the Colombo shooting, Chief Seedman and Commissioner Daley held daily briefings. And less than a week later, Chief Seedman, in contrast to the previous reluctance of ranking officers to invite queries in cases under investigation, made a surprising appearance as a guest on a Sunday television news show and answered the public's questions.

In addition to commenting on the Colombo case, he said the police were making "signifi-

cant progress" investigating the May 21 slaying of two patrol men in Harlem and the June 24 strangling of an airline stewardess on the East Side.

To some extent, the nature of these crimes create extra public pressure on the police since these killings arouse the public and the media far more than the less sensational but perhaps more serious frequency of crime among the poor.

In the case of the Colombo shooting, for instance, public interest has been heightened because of a welter of Mafia oriented fiction, fact and, perhaps, a combination of the two in recent months.

The man in the street these days is as likely as one of Chief Seedman's weary detectives to know what a "button man" is. Indeed, in the moments after the Colombo shooting, one TV newsman, interviewing eyewitnesses, was heard to ask: "Did you feel you were in some chapter from 'The Godfather'?"

The new goal of greater release of information to the public was described by Mr. Daley, a former newsman who took his post last month, as an attempt to improve public confidence. The danger under the old system of releasing infrequent scraps of information, he said, was that the police could seem like "dolts" through their silence and discourage public cooperation.

Charges of Corruption

The new policy, which is described as being a major priority of Commissioner Patrick V. Murphy, comes at a time when the department's image has suffered from newspaper and official inquiries into alleged widespread corruption.

One of the obvious risks is that the promise of greater information might remain unfulfilled. Another is that the concern for image restoration could run afoul of some of the department's traditions, such as a detective's natural reticence to compromise an investigation by publicizing information prematurely.

Chief Seedman, for example, who seems to enjoy fencing with inquiring newsmen, was described by one colleague as "of the school that likes to sit on everything and wait for the final piece to fall into place. Some who have seen him in operation say that the chief indicated this attitude yesterday with his smile and "sore throat."

Whatever the risks prove to be in the problem of knowing how and when to release greater information, some high officials in the department have decided to face them.