

Italy in Peril: Organized Crime and State Impotence in Italy

In the small Italian town of Rosarno, riots erupted in early January as illegal workers protested against the racist attack of two men by the criminal organization that had arranged for their migration and employment in Calabria. The riots marked a symptom of a wider problem in Italy's south – the government's inability to cope with the increasing power and bravado of organized crime groups. The organizations responsible for bringing illegal workers into Calabria operate outside the formal Italian economy and their operations present a growing threat to the human rights of immigrants and Europe's internal security.

The civil unrest in Rosarno began after two Nigerian men were shot at outside an encampment in a disused food warehouse to the north of the town, set up temporarily to house approximately 1,000 illegal workers. The attack resulted in retaliatory riots instigated by the workers who marched into the town, overturning cars and organizing roadblocks during a 3-day confrontation. The local authorities, assisted by the Carabinieri (Italy's national guard), arrested the majority of the protesters and transported them via trains and buses to deportation centers. Many of the workers involved in the rioting had been brought to Italy to work during the orange harvest in Rosarno under the supervision of the local mafia, who were exploiting their cheap labor.

This practice is widespread in Italy, particularly in the agricultural and textile sectors and accounts for nine percent of the country's overall GDP according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Flavio Di Giacomo, spokesman for the IOM in Italy, stated that a large amount of Italy's domestic economic activity is based on the exploitation of illegal immigrants who live in sub-human conditions without basic human rights, working as "semi-slaves."

1.1 The 'Ndrangheta

The region where the riots occurred is largely controlled by a mafia organization called the 'Ndrangheta,' (deriving from the Greek word 'andragathía' meaning 'heroism'). According to Letizia Paoli, a criminology professor who studied the structure of the 'Ndrangheta, the organization developed as a result of negotiations to end years of inter-family violence in Calabria. The size and scale of the organization is not fully known but it is thought to rival the more known mafia organizations, the Naples-based 'Camorra' and the Apulia-based 'Sacra Corona Unita'.

Due to the widespread activities of the 'Ndrangheta, Calabria is an area where few taxes are collected and as a result, organized crime has filled the void left by the absence of governance.

Currently, the 'Ndrangheta manages the traffic, runs the local supermarkets, the sea ports and consequently the region's imports and exports, as well as immigration flows. The Italian government claims that the annual income of the 'Ndrangheta equates to 3.5 percent of Italy's GDP, estimated at €35 billion a year - far surpassing the annual output of Calabria's legal economy. Nicola Gratteri, an Italian magistrate judge who focuses on tackling organized crime in Italy believes this figure is "vastly underestimated" as the links that the 'Ndrangheta now have with Latin America have facilitated the establishment of a drug trafficking route, which has helped the organization become a leading actor in the global cocaine trade. Giuseppe Lumia, director of the Italian Anti-Mafia Commission produced a 237-page report detailing the 'Ndrangheta's activities and suggested that the organization is involved in the production and distribution of cocaine. Lumia believes that as much as 80 percent of the cocaine imported into Europe is smuggled via Calabria under the supervision of a cartel of families that control the port of Gioia Tauro, one of the Mediterranean's largest seaports.

According to an informant, the 'Ndrangheta have also moved into the lucrative and often expensive business of waste disposal, flouting otherwise strict European laws by sinking ships containing hazardous materials. Last September a sunken vessel was found 30km off the southwestern coast of Italy that was believed to contain yellow barrels of unmarked radioactive material; the informant claimed that this was among several ships which he had sunk in order to illegally dispose of toxic waste. The environmental NGO Greenpeace has compiled a list of ships containing toxic waste that have seemingly disappeared off the coast of Italy. The Italian government has promised to investigate as many as 30 such incidents.

1.2 Italy's response

In response to the riots in Rosarno many prominent figures in Italy's government denounced the immigrants rather than addressing the issue of organized crime; the root cause of the conflict. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni of Lega Nord recently stated that the regional Calabrian authorities are "doing nothing about immigration", which he described as "a bomb waiting to explode." Ironically enough this has become the case in a literal sense as car bomb attacks organized by the 'Ndrangheta against lawyers seeking to prosecute members of the organization have become commonplace. A recent bomb attack targeted Salvatore di Landro, the attorney general of Reggio Calabria (Calabria's capital) causing local magistrate judges and many state prosecutors working in the region to consider themselves at risk.

The president of the Calabria region, Agazio Loiero, has noted that the standoff has a long history and that the rioting comes as no surprise to the government. He stated that Italy's recently drafted laws that criminalize illegal immigrants and give Italian civilians the right to police them have only made matters worse. The government has been called upon by the Council of Europe and the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO) to answer accusations of xenophobia and discrimination against foreign workers as a result. Loiero stated that a year ago the interior minister had promised to help immigrants whereas now it appears that the government is resolving the situation by deporting them.

Although, as a NATO Parliamentary Assembly report states, there have been some fresh efforts to counter organized crime in the region, operations to control and limit the capabilities of the 'Ndrangheta, including complex international police operations, have had limited success. In addition to the national police, the Carabinieri and the Italian financial police (Guardia di Finanza) are also conducting anti-mafia operations in the fields of tax, border and money-laundering controls, yet the broader picture still remains bleak.

In recent years there have been a series of pan-European initiatives against the Camorra, the 'Ndrangheta and the Sacra Corona Unita which have led the way forward in tackling Italy's problem. Investigative bodies as far reaching as the Australian Federal Police have provided assistance in combating the mafia abroad, but until the Italian government allows a multinational taskforce to manage the policing of organized crime, it is likely that the illegal activities of the 'Ndrangheta will continue, leaving thousands of immigrants in the region vulnerable to further abuse.

By Ben Romberg

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1.3 Resources

1.3.1 International and Governmental Organizations

The Council of Europe (CoE)

Founded on 5 May 1949 by 10 countries, the Council of Europe seeks to develop common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals throughout Europe.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The largest intergovernmental organization in the field of migration works closely with governmental, intergovernmental and nongovernmental partners. IOM works to help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, promote international cooperation on migration issues, assist in the search for practical solutions to migration problems, and provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced people.

Europol

Europol is the European Law Enforcement Agency which aims at improving the effectiveness and co-operation of the competent authorities in the member states in preventing and combating terrorism, unlawful drug trafficking and other serious forms of organized crime. Currently Europol is working with the Italian authorities to limit the activities of organized crime.

Italian Financial Police (Guardia di Finanza)

The police force under the authority of the economy and finance minister, (currently Giulio Tremonti) it maintains military status, (like the Carabinieri) and is part of the Italian armed forces. It is tasked with monitoring and policing financial, economic and judiciary matters.

1.3.2 Research and Academia

The Italian Anti-Mafia Commission

A bicameral commission of the Italian Parliament, composed of members from the Chambers of Deputies, (Camera dei Deputati) that is required to investigate mafia-related crime including the activities of the Camorra, the 'Ndrangheta and the Sacra Corona Unita. Giuseppe Lumia is the current director of the Commission, belonging to the Democratic Party of the Left (Partito democratico della Sinistra, PDS). Available in Italian only.

Leitzia Paoli (based at KULeuven)

Former investigative journalist and professor in social and political sciences, Letizia Paoli has written extensively on the structure and political links of organized crime in Italy. Currently lecturing in criminology at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, her work on the Mafia continues to inform legal and political institutions across Europe.

1.3.3 Non-Governmental Organizations and Media

Greenpeace Italy

The international environmental NGO Greenpeace investigates, exposes and confronts environmental abuse by governments and corporations around the world . In Italy, Greenpeace currently monitors waste disposal and maintains a list of ships believed to have been sunk containing cargos of toxic waste. Available in Italian only.

La Repubblica

The center-left Italian newspaper and second largest in circulation reports on organized crime and maintains a critical stance on the government's approach to immigration. *La Repubblica* is also one of the few titles not owned by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and therefore are able to provide a more objective stance on government policy. Articles on the 'Ndrangheta and the Rosarno riots are automatically translated from Italian.