

NEWS

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'Nigerian Mafia' Growing Player in Italian Trafficking, Laundering Operations

By Valentina Pasquali

Italian authorities have grown increasingly concerned over the involvement of Nigerian criminal groups in the country's illicit sex- and drug-trafficking markets, sources told *ACAMS moneylaundering.com*.

The past month alone has seen dozens of arrests in cities across the southern European nation as part of multiple investigations into different "clans" of what is now broadly referred to as the "Nigerian Mafia," with illicit proceeds sent back to Nigeria via cash smuggling, hawala-like transfers and other forms of unregulated money transmission.

That suspects typically use informal financial channels has made the funds especially hard to trace, five sources, including prosecutors and a compliance officer, told *moneylaundering.com*.

Clans are known to control several banks in Nigeria, but current evidence does not indicate that those institutions or Italian lenders are part of the laundering cycle, said Stefano Orsi, a senior prosecutor in the northern Italian city of Bologna.

"There is scant availability of [relevant] suspicious transactions

reports, as far as I know," according to Orsi, who added that preliminary findings suggest some of the funds may have passed through banks in London.

Nigerian organized crime's reach is limited relative to other domestic criminal organizations, like the 'Ndrangheta or Camorra, with respect to drug trafficking, but already significant in Italy's thriving illegal sex-trafficking industry, he said.

In July, investigators in the northern regions of Piemonte and Emilia-Romagna, including a team led by Orsi, detained nearly 40 individuals suspected of running drugs and prostitutes, recruiting new members and handling relationships with other criminal groups on behalf of the Maphite clan.

The arrests follow a two-year investigation built on information from a confidential source within the clan and the discovery, in a postal package originating from Nigeria, of a booklet detailing the clan's structure, rites and rules.

Nigerian criminals have been present in Italy for two decades, mostly in the southern region of Campania, and Piemonte and Emilia-Romagna in the north. But authorities long underestimated them on the belief that domestic groups would choke them out of the illicit market, said Franco Roberti, the country's former top organized-crime prosecutor.

The groups have instead found ways to coexist, either by splitting certain regional drug- and arms-smuggling markets or pursuing joint ventures.

"Investigations have found that the clans operate in absolute secrecy, and on a local basis, independently from one another, so it's very hard to build a complete picture," said Roberti, now a council member in Campania's regional government.

Maphite, one of several Nigerian criminal groups active in Italy

along with Black Axe, Eiye and Vikings, is an acronym for Maximum Academic Performance Highly Intellectuals Train Executioner.

The clans progressed from university secret societies that proliferated in Nigeria in the early 1980s and turned increasingly powerful and violent in the decades that followed, expanding overseas into Italy and other nations with large Nigerian diasporas, according to the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia, or DIA, an interagency group.

“The profits of the illicit activities are typically used to fund the purchase of drugs to be retailed in Italian streets or reinvested to buy firms that import and sell ethnic products, and provide cover for the criminal operations,” the DIA found in a report covering the last six months of 2018. “They are also remitted to Nigeria to support family members and finance criminal organizations in the homeland.”

According to the nearly 570-page document, the doubling of remittances to Nigeria from 2016 to nearly €75 million by 2018, while predominantly an outcome of legal income growth among Nigerian immigrants, also reflects the profitability of clans-linked enterprises.

Nigerian clans have adopted the sophisticated financing and laundering techniques employed by Italian organized criminals, and sometime use bank accounts held by the same front men, said Ranieri Razzante, a professor in anti-money laundering law at the University of Bologna.

“We are no longer talking about an occasional presence but a force that has a consolidated international reach,” Razzante said. “Other European countries should not undervalue the scale of the threat.”

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