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Italian Mafia Up To Dirty Business

By Keya Acharya

NAPLES, Dec 16 2013 (IPS) - The beauty of the Bay of Naples under a setting sun, the romance of Sorrento and the scenic splendour of the Amalfi coastline pull thousands of visitors to southern Italy. But the region is also home to an ugly truth.

The area between Caserta and Naples in the Campania region has come to be known as Italy's 'garbage bin', thanks to the mafia.

The country produces nearly 100 million tonnes of garbage per year, with over a third of it reportedly cornered by the mafia.

The mafia initially began by charging industries from the north for disposing of their toxic wastes in landfills in Campania, especially the Resit landfill site in Giugliano. A neglected and under-regulated sector, waste disposal was an easy front for the mafia to generate and launder money.

"We have been shouting about this for 20 years, but with no response from the government. They did not want to listen," says Antonio Pergolizzi of the environmental NGO Legambiente which has been researching the issue since 1994.

Legambiente coined the term 'ecomafie' or ecomafia for this new face of the mafia.

Italian legislation for solid waste disposal came in 2001, but without adequate provisions to check proper disposal. The law was subsequently amended in 2006 to encompass 152 new types of environmental crimes, including illegal disposal and organised smuggling of waste.

But in 2010, Italy's measures to clean up Naples were found to be in breach of the European Union (EU) legislation and an inspection took place in. By 2012, the EU threatened court action against Italy.

"The eco mafia are now dumping toxics into quarries, on lands, into waters, with no care for aquifers or the environment, and with serious consequences for the community," Pergolizzi told an international gathering of journalists at Castell dell'Ovo on the seafront in Naples that was attended by this correspondent. The meet was organised by the NGO Greenaccord.

The country's garbage crisis is now almost institutionalised as industries find it cheaper to pay the mafia to dispose of their waste and so says attorney Franco Roberti.

According to him, the mafia are now making alliances with non-waste agencies too.

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“They are looking at businesses for financing, giving funds, laundering money. Italy’s clean economy is now getting dirtier,” he says.

Wind farms and other alternative energy businesses are known to have been built with mafia money.

Pergolizzi says the mafia are cornering road-building and other contracts, using building yards as the site for mixing gravel and toxic wastes “all over north and south Italy.”

Real estate on these dumping yards has become a profitable venture for the mafia.

Legambiente estimates that the business of illegally dumping toxic waste on Italian farmland and real estate land is worth over 26 billion dollars a year, writes U.S. journalist Christine Macdonald in E Magazine.

The business of dumping toxic waste has encompassed recycling material, such as plastics, with serious environmental consequences, says Legambiente.

“We now have a whole group of recycling factories available, but there is no raw material for them; the recyclables are all getting diverted elsewhere,” says Pergolizzi.

At the SRI recycling factory in Caserta, a company officer explains how the authorities are now keeping a close watch on transportation of recycling material to the factory, which bales plastics, cardboard and cans separately and sends them on to actual recycling firms.

Naples’ new mayor, Tommaso Sodano, a former judge and new political entrant, says he is now taking a personal interest in recycling and in ways to deal with the garbage crisis.

“My job as a judge is the most important reason for me to have come into politics,” Sodano told journalists. “In both jobs, there have been, and are, obstacles in my way, which I will deal with as part of my work.”

Widespread dumping of toxics by the mafia in the Campania region has been found to be linked to cancers and congenital malformation. In two decades, the number of tumours in men in the region has risen by 47 percent and in women by 40 percent, according to a BBC report.

Earlier this month, tens of thousands of people protested on the streets of Naples, some with placards showing pictures of children who had died of cancer, and demanding an immediate clean-up.

Highlighting Italy’s deep socio-religious connections, Alfonso Cauteruccio, head of Greenaccord, says the moral authority of the Roman Catholic Church is important in this matter.

The Vatican’s Cardinal Sepe has suggested to his audience at the meeting that a possible deterrent would be to refuse Holy Communion – the ultimate sacrament for believers – to those who pollute.

Roman Catholic Pope Francis has also waded into the waters, sending a message to the meeting in Naples that journalists and scientists

The first step is to take practical measures, says attorney Roberti. “There is no coordination between the agencies producing evidence. We need a re-organisation of our judicial system.”

“The nexus runs deep,” says Antonio Giordano of the Sbarro Institute in Philadelphia, pointing a finger at the health and environment ministry which he said “knew and did nothing in the last 30-40 years.”

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