

Italy

Collapse hailed

Mafiosi held after 'revolt'

PALERMO, Sicily, Nov 2, (RTRS): In a large scale revolt, 36 shopkeepers and businessmen have denounced the mafia and reported extortion rackets in a mob stronghold near the Sicilian capital, leading to the arrest of 21 suspects, police said on Monday.

Prime Minister **Matteo Renzi** hailed the apparent collapse of the mafia code of silence, or omerta, in the town of Bagheria, where the "boss of bosses" Bernardo Provenzano had spent many years



Renzi

as a fugitive before his eventual capture in 2006. Police said they issued 22 arrest warrants for mafia chiefs and their henchmen based on information the local businessmen provided. After the arrests, just one suspect was still on the run.

Giuseppe De Ruggi, commanding officer of the Carabinieri military police, told Reuters it was unheard of for so many victims to stand up at once to the Sicilian Mafia, known as Cosa Nostra, especially in a traditional bastion for the mob.

"In a place like Bagheria, which is not a big city, it's very significant to see such a high number of collaborators," he said.

Sicilian businessmen have long had to choose between handing extortion money to Cosa Nostra — "Our Thing" in Italian — or face the consequences of violent reprisal, ranging from death threats to arson and even assassination.

Refuse

"Thanks to the courage of those who refuse to be blackmailed, thanks to the Carabinieri and investigators, Bagheria is not their thing," Renzi said on Twitter.

Many economists and experts blame organised crime for the south's chronically sluggish and underdeveloped economy. The Mezzogiorno area, which includes Sicily and other southern regions, is only now emerging from seven years of recession.

Investigators documented about 50 extortion payments by construction firms, supermarkets, furniture and clothing stores, fruit and fish sellers and slot machine halls. A Bagheria mobster turned state witness also helped with testimony.

In one case, a construction business owner began paying the equivalent of 1,500 euros a month plus a percentage on individual jobs in the 1990s. He was eventually forced to sell his home and business to pay off the mafia, Palermo prosecutor Leonardo Agueci told Reuters.

Excessive extortion requests in recent years may have been what prompted so many businesses to decide to report the shakedowns to police, Agueci said, calling the revolt by businesses a "sizable and growing phenomenon".

A number of the suspects were already behind bars when the arrest warrants were issued, police said.

Cosa Nostra was once Italy's most powerful criminal group, but it has lost some of its sway due to the state's ability to capture many of its top bosses.

The Calabrian mafia, known as the 'Ndrangheta, has replaced Cosa Nostra as the country's most dangerous criminal network. In Calabria, it is still rare for businessmen to stand up to the mob.

Europe

French pilots arrested: Two French pilots who slipped out of the Dominican Republic in mysterious circumstances after being convicted of cocaine trafficking were formally arrested and remanded in custody in France on Monday.

Pascal Fauret, 55, and co-pilot Bruno Odos, 56, were arrested early Monday at their homes near the southeast city of Lyon.

They were both remanded in custody after appearing before French judges. Both are awaiting transfer to the southern port city of Marseille, where the investigation is being conducted.

Fauret and Odos were arrested in March 2013 along with two other men as they were about to take off from the Dominican resort of Punta Cana.

Authorities said they were preparing to leave on a privately hired mid-size Dassault Falcon 50 jet with 26 suitcases containing 680 kilograms (1,500 pounds) of cocaine.

All four men deny they knew that the drugs were on board the plane. (AFP)

'Hate crimes underreported': A European minority rights body is urging Cypriot authorities to ensure that hate crimes are properly identified and effectively dealt with following reports of an increase in racially motivated violence.

The European Council's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities says most observers and some govern-



The early morning sun shines through trees and highlights autumn leaves at a park in Antwerp, Belgium on Nov 1. (AP)

Vatican

Pope's CAR trip on cards despite violence

2 arrested in new Vatileaks scandal

VATICAN CITY, Nov 2, (AFP): The Vatican has arrested a Spanish prelate and social media expert for allegedly stealing and leaking classified documents in the second such scandal to hit the secretive institution in three years.

Monsignor Lucio Angel Vallejo Balda, 54, who served on a special commission set up by Pope Francis to advise him on economic reform within the Vatican, was arrested along with a second member of the commission, Francesca Chauqui, who has been dubbed a "sex bomb".

The arrests were part of a several months-long investigation into the "misappropriation and disclosure of classified documents and information".

They followed Italian media reports at the weekend that Vatican police were investigating the attempted theft of a laptop belonging to Libero Milone, the head of the city state's new finance office.

Both Vallejo Balda and social media expert Chauqui, 33, were arrested but she was released by Vatican prosecutor Roberto Zannotti on Monday because she agreed to collaborate with investigators and was not considered a flight risk.

Economic

Chauqui's appointment to the economic committee, which was hand-picked by the pope, caused no little embarrassment in 2013 when it emerged the woman dubbed a "sex bomb" by the Italian media had been highly critical of the Vatican on Twitter.

Vatican expert Sandro Andrea Tomielli said Monday it was Vallejo Balda who got Chauqui a place on the committee.

A furious Vatican also denounced

the expected publication this week of two new books believed to be based on leaks from hackers releasing information regarding the famously murky world of its finances.

And it referred to the last time employees aired the centuries-old institution's dirty laundry.

In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI's butler engineered a series of leaks that revealed fierce infighting in the highest echelons of the Catholic Church and allegations of serious fraud in the running of the city state.

Loyal

Butler Paolo Gabriele was sentenced to 18 months in prison for stealing secret papal memos but pardoned by Pope Benedict, who nonetheless banished the once loyal servant from the Vatican for good.

"As far as the books announced for the coming days go, it is clear that this time too, just as in the past, they are the fruit of a serious betrayal of the pope's trust," the Vatican statement said.

It also dismissed any attempts to echo the butler's excuse that he leaked the information for the pope's own good.

Italian journalist Emiliano Fittipaldi, who is releasing "Avarice: Documents Revealing Wealth, Scandals and Secrets of Francis' Church", writes for L'Espresso newsweekly, an avid publisher of leaks in recent years.

"Merchants in the Temple", by Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi, follows his 2012 book which was based on information gathered from Benedict's butler in a scandal some believe was the reason behind the pontiff's historic resignation.

Nuzzi is reported to be friends with Chauqui, who hit the headlines again

in 2014 when she was suspected of having organised a lavish party for the rich and famous on a Vatican terrace at the Holy See's expense — much to Francis's fury.

The Vatican said it was considering taking legal action against the journalists.

Francis was tasked by his cardinal electors to stamp his authority on the bickering Curia, the Church's governing body, and clean up the Vatican bank — but the fresh leaks looked set to fuel criticisms of his reform programme.

His drive for transparency at the bank, once renowned for shady dealings, has ruffled feathers and supporters say the pontiff has been targeted by revengeful mudslingers — including those behind a rumour last month, denied by the Vatican, that Francis has a benign brain tumour.

Also:

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis's visit to the violence-hit Central African Republic (CAR) remains "on the programme", the Vatican said Monday, but the trip would have to be cancelled if fighting in the capital intensifies.

"The pope's visit to CAR remains on the programme. Francis greatly desires to go there," the Vatican's deputy spokesman **Ciro Benedettini** told AFP.

The pope is expected in the poor landlocked country from November 28 to 29 during a much-anticipated visit to Africa which will also see him travel to Kenya and Uganda. The six-day tour, his first to the continent, will begin on November 25.

But Francis hinted this weekend that part of the journey may have to be scrapped, saying he "hoped" to visit CAR despite daily violence in the cap-

ital Bangui between Christians and Muslims. The trip had previously been definite.

The 78-year-old Argentine is scheduled to visit a mosque in one of the most dangerous areas of the city, where vigilantes mainly drawn from the Christian majority emerged to avenge atrocities by Muslim ex-rebels who had seized power for 10 months in 2013.

On Saturday, Muslim militants killed at least two people and wounded several in a Christian neighbourhood of the capital.

The country has suffered recurring bouts of religious bloodletting since the ousting in March 2013 of then president Francois Bozize, a Christian, by mainly Muslim Seleka rebels, sparked months of violence.

The latest clashes have also cast a shadow over plans by the transitional authorities to hold a constitutional referendum and kick off the first stage of two-step presidential and parliamentary elections by the end of the year.

Radio Vatican expert Luis Badilla said "the most delicate issue... concerns the possible reaction from extremist Islamic groups that are not under the control of moderate Muslim leaders, in particular where large crowds are expected."

Such crowds are likely for the scheduled mass at the cathedral, a prayer vigil with young people, the visit to Koudoukou mosque and the final mass at the city's sports stadium.

Roman Catholic Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga said a Vatican envoy carrying out a reconnaissance of the area last week along with government representatives received verbal death threats at the mosque.

Seamen hold 2-day strike: Greece's ferries have stopped running for 48 hours as seamen walked off the job to protest growing unemployment in their sector, falling income and new austerity measures as part of the country's third bailout.

The two-day strike that started Monday will leave all ferries in the country tied up

in port, cutting transport links to the mainland for dozens of inhabited islands that have no airport. The seamen's union described the walkout as a "warning strike" and said it will also join a general strike set for Nov 12.

Left-wing Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' coalition government, re-elected in September, has signed up to a raft of new

spending cuts and tax hikes in return for the new 86 billion euro, three-year bailout that will keep the country afloat. (AP)

Chair wants more say: Eurogroup chair Jeroen Dijsselbloem said on Monday that more should be done to involve member states outside the EU's

currency union in decisions that affected them in order to give "Britain and the other outs" more comfort.

Dijsselbloem is also Dutch finance minister. The Dutch assume the rotating European Union presidency in January.

"I think we should have an open discussion about how we can give Britain and other (euro) outs comfort if necessary," he said, adding that the design of the EU's banking union had been modified to reflect British needs.

Dijsselbloem said he sympathised with British criticism of the EU's treaty commitment to "ever closer union". Scrapping the phrase is a key demand of British Prime Minister David Cameron, who hopes to secure a "yes" vote in a referendum on renegotiated membership terms. (RTRS)

One dead in floods: An elderly man has died in floods triggered by torrential rains in southern Portugal's popular Algarve tourist region, police said Monday, with a mudslide causing serious damage to one seaside town.

The body of the 79-year-old was found on Monday morning around 100 metres (yards) from his vehicle on a flooded road near the town of Loule.

A number of cafes and restaurants in Albufeira were wiped out when a mudslide ran through the town's historic centre, and firefighters had to evacuate some locals to escape the rapidly rising waters. (AFP)



Visitors to the Natural History Museum in Berlin lie on a couch for a virtual journey through our solar system as a map of Berlin is being displayed on Nov 1. (AFP)