

THE AGE

Mafia scrutiny under question

By RICHARD BAKER and NICK McKENZIE with JO McKENNA in ROME
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The Australian Federal Police's closure of its Rome office shows Australian law enforcement agencies have been underestimating the Calabrian Mafia's reach, senior Italian anti-Mafia investigators claim.

Italian authorities are calling on the Australian Government to increase co-operation between police in the two countries to combat the Mafia.

The Rome bureau was closed in 2002 with little public discussion, despite the historical and continuing Italian Mafia presence in Australia.

It was just the fourth of 35 overseas federal police posts to have been closed since 1977, and by far the largest and most prominent. The other three were Honolulu, Nicosia in Cyprus and Wellington.

Only last week, Victoria Police's new Chief Commissioner, Simon Overland, told radio 3AW the Italian Mafia still had a strong presence in Melbourne and Australia.

"The Mafia, yes. They have a long history. They are still here, still operating," Mr Overland said.

Last month, the AFP launched a fresh inquiry into allegations that the Liberal Party had accepted up to \$100,000 in donations from Mafia-linked businessmen to help alleged Calabrian crime figure Francesco Madafferi get a visa to stay in Australia. Madafferi was arrested last year in connection with a syndicate accused of involvement in the world's largest importation of ecstasy into Melbourne in 2007.

The Rome AFP office was relocated to Belgrade in Serbia in 2003 and was still expected to cover Italy, even though it was not staffed with Italian speakers.

The absence of an Australian liaison officer in Rome reduced the federal police's ability to lobby Italian authorities to push ahead with the extradition to Italy of several Australians - including Victorians Nicola Ciconte and Vincenzo Medici - over their alleged involvement in a conspiracy to import 500kilograms of cocaine into Melbourne about six years ago.

But sources close to the decision to shut the Rome post down said it was sensible and prompted by the rise of drug manufacturing in other parts of Europe such as the Netherlands.

An AFP spokeswoman told The Age: "It is not possible to have AFP officers in every country around the world. The AFP places its personnel strategically to reflect the most efficient approach possible."

She added that the "prevailing conditions that initiated the opening of the Rome post in 1990 were no longer a priority" when it was shut down. Federal police sources said the Italians also reduced their police presence in Australia around the same time as the AFP's Rome office was closed.

The AFP's decision to leave Rome has baffled Italy's top anti-Mafia investigators.

"We would like to resume much more intense collaboration, as in the past we had very positive experiences," said Vincenzo Macri, a senior investigator at the National Anti-Mafia Directorate in Rome.

Mr Macri said the revelation of the massive ecstasy haul in 2007 had made clear the "shocking" extent of Calabrian organised crime in Australia.

While applauding that drugs bust, he said Australian law enforcement agencies needed to "resume investigations on a vast scale" into the entire Mafia network in Australia.

"Otherwise, we risk responding only to single, one-off events without seeing them as part of the whole," Mr Macri said.

Former United Nations undersecretary for drug control Pino Arlacchi said the AFP's decision to leave Rome was "quite bizarre".

Having worked on organised crime in Kosovo for the European Union in 2004, Mr Arlacchi said Serbian crime syndicates did not have the same reach as the Mafia.

"The white paper on Serbian organised crime that I discussed with Serbian authorities a couple of months ago speaks of about 90 people comprising Serbian organised crime.

"The 'Ndrangheta (Calabrian Mafia) has 6000 people, with ramifications in more than 20 countries and strongholds in Bolivia, Colombia, Canada, Australia and Germany."