

Mafia steps up violence as Berlusconi takes the reins

Criminal clans jostle for position

Opportunities arise during changeover

By Guy Dinmore in Rome

The bomb under his parked Mercedes exploded just as Nino Princi was about to get into it.

What police described as a small but expertly managed amount of explosive was intended to kill, yet the 45-year-old businessman was still clinging to life last week after doctors amputated both arms and legs. He also lost his sight.

For the 'Ndrangheta, as the Mafia is known in Italy's southern region of Calabria, use of the car bomb was unusual.

Investigators believe it was meant to send a strong message and that Mr Princi was caught up in an inter-clan war for control over the port of Gioia Tauro, the Mediterranean's busiest container port and Europe's main point of entry for cocaine from Colombia.

A recent report by parliament's anti-Mafia commission found that the 'Ndrangheta, believed to be the most powerful of Italy's diverse Mafia organisations, "controls or influences a large part of the economic activity

around the port and uses the facility as a base for illegal trafficking".

The port complex, investigators say, has become a more attractive prospect with the return to power of Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right government, which is committed to infrastructure development.

A business plan proposed by an international consultancy foresees investment of €1.5bn (\$2.3bn, £1.2bn) in the port, including a regasification terminal.

One week after losing parliamentary elections last month, the outgoing centre-left government used its powers to dissolve Gioia Tauro town council, alleging infiltration by organised

crime. In the nearby city of Reggio Calabria, anti-Mafia prosecutors struggling to contain an upsurge in 'Ndrangheta violence have been plunged into an internal crisis that some say has been created to weaken their authority at a critical juncture.

Last week, a bug was found in a corridor between the anti-Mafia prosecutors' heavily guarded offices, and a locked door into the office of the newly arrived chief prosecutor was found open.

Anonymous letters purporting to reveal details of their private lives have been circulating. Now investigators are investigating the investigators just as they were preparing to bring charges in several important cases. "This office is in a crisis," says one senior official. "This is just what the Mafia wants."

Who is behind the bugging and the letters is not known. However, investigators point out that the 'Ndrangheta, which has penetrated political life and the media at many levels, prefers to bring down their state opponents through subterfuge rather than assassination.

Prosecutors say the 'Ndrangheta has no ideological or political preferences but will back the party they believe is most likely to serve their interests.

