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Palermo Shops Team Up to Offer Consumers Mafia-Free Shopping

May 2 (Bloomberg) -- A collection of 106 shops and businesses in Palermo, Sicily, that refuse to give in to mafia extortion have teamed up to offer mob-free shopping 15 years after the murder of the local clothing-maker who inspired the effort.

The list of companies released today was compiled by a group of antimafia activists inspired by Libero Grassi, who was gunned down on Aug. 29, 1991, for speaking out against the Sicilian Mafia's extortion. The group has also put together a list of more than 7,000 consumers who pledge to do their shopping only where the mob doesn't collect its monthly "pizzo," or extortion fee.

More than 80 percent of businesses in Palermo hand over a monthly tax to the Sicilian mob, known as Cosa Nostra, according to Italy's chief antimafia prosecutor Piero Grasso. Crime syndicates drained 28 billion euros (\$33.5 billion) from the legal economy in 2004, says SOS Impresa, a Rome-based group that fights corruption.

"The pizzo is weighing on our economy like lead," said Vittorio Greco, a part-time professor of philosophy at the University of Palermo and one of the founding members of the Addiopizzo, or Goodbye Pizzo, Committee. "We're trying to liberate ourselves of this weight."

The strategy of the shop owners, which range from travel agencies to grocery stores to pubs, is to stand up to mafia violence together because there is strength in numbers. Grasso had stood alone and it cost him his life, Greco said.

'Without Dignity'

This is the first time that so many businesses have publicly stood against mob racketeering in Palermo. The businesses may now form an "antiracket" group in Palermo that denounces extortion requests to police, Greco said. No such group has ever existed in Palermo, Sicily's capital.

The Addiopizzo Committee today presented the list to reporters in Palermo and has published it on its Web site <http://www.addiopizzo.org/>. Friday a public demonstration will be held in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Palermo, the Kalsa, a notorious mafia stronghold. Chief antimafia prosecutor Grasso is among those scheduled to speak.

The small antimafia organization formed about two years ago after a group of about 10 university students pasted stickers on posts and signboards in central Palermo that read: "An entire people that pays the pizzo is a people without dignity."

Most of the students were adolescents when Grasso was murdered, and when magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino were blown up by mafia car bombs in 1992, Greco said. The antimafia sentiment in Palermo has grown up, he said.

The mafia has again been in the spotlight recently because of the police capture of Bernardo Provenzano, Cosa

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Nostra's boss of bosses, on April 11. Provenzano was arrested in an abandoned country house above his native town of Corleone after almost 43 years as a fugitive.

``It's a happy coincidence" that Provenzano's capture corresponds to the banding together of businesses and consumers against the mob, Greco said. ``The police forces were able to capture Provenzano just as civil society was able to reach this goal."

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