

Standing up to the mafia

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FACED with the soaring cost of protection, Sicilian employers have vowed to stand up to the mafia by refusing to pay the "pizzo" demanded by the mobsters.

An extraordinary meeting of the Sicilian branch of Confindustria, the employers' federation, in central Sicily yesterday voted unanimously to expel any member who paid the mafia tax.

The initiative for the revolt against the mafia came from Andrea Vecchio, head of the construction industry bosses in Catania on the island's west coast, who received no fewer than four death threats in as many days on his return from holidays for refusing to pay.

Two of his building sites came under attack at the same time.

Mr Vecchio, who with his family has since been under police protection, wrote to President Giorgio Napolitano, saying:

"We can't carry on living like this. It's not only us, the entrepreneurs, who are being attacked, but the state itself."

"In the name of all Sicilian businessmen . . . we want to live like citizens in a normal country, nothing more."

Confindustria national deputy president Ettore Artioli, also at yesterday's meeting, called for the army to intervene in Sicily to combat the mafia.

He said Confindustria was fully behind the initiative.

Energetic new, younger leaders had been appointed to head the employers' organisations most at risk on Sicily, notably at Agrigento, Catania and Caltanissetta, he said.

Mr Artioli added that several hundred phantom companies, which paid their subscriptions to Confindustria only in order to infiltrate chambers of commerce and other associated organisations, had been thrown out of the federation.

Mafia protection money income is estimated at some 10 billion euros (\$A16.8 billion) a year by the Sicilian branch of Confindustria, which believes few economic activities escape the tentacles of the "Piovra" (octopus), as the mafia is dubbed.

A University of Palermo study said the mafia demanded payment of about 60 euros (\$A100) a month on average from street vendors, while the "pizzo" climbs to more than 450 euros (\$A754) a month for shops and towards 600 euros for restaurants and small hotels.

Firms in charge of construction or road maintenance can expect to pay on average 17,000 euros (\$A28,487.6) per site, according to the study.

From the Jordanian capital, Amman, where he is on a visit, Prime Minister Romano Prodi last night hailed the "good example" being set by Confindustria, saying the "fight against the mafia can only be won if civil society reacts".

But Mr Prodi ruled out deploying the army on Sicily, insisting that "the reaction of civil society is more effective".

The Italian army has not been deployed against the mafia on Sicily since 1992.

AFP

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