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Businesses in Sicily unite with 'mob-free' shopping

Bloomberg News

TUESDAY, MAY 2, 2006

PALERMO, Sicily A collection of 106 shops and other businesses here that refuse to give in to Mafia extortion have teamed up to offer "mob-free" shopping 15 years after the killing of the local clothing maker who inspired the effort.

The list of companies released Tuesday was compiled by a group inspired by Libero Grassi, who was gunned down 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 does not collect its monthly "pizzo," or extortion fee.

More than 80 percent of businesses in Palermo hand over a monthly fee to the Sicilian mob, known as the Cosa Nostra, according to Italy's chief prosecutor of Mafia cases, Piero Grasso. In 2004, crime syndicates drained €28 billion, now worth \$35 billion, from the legal economy, according to SOS Impresa, a group based in Rome 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 Comitato Addiopizzo, or Goodbye Pizzo Committee. "We're trying to liberate ourselves of this weight."

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

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

Addiopizzo on Tuesday presented the list to reporters in Palermo and has published it on [www.addiopizzo.org](#), its Web site. A public demonstration is scheduled for Friday in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Palermo, the Kalsa, notorious as a Mafia stronghold. Grasso, the prosecutor, is among those scheduled to speak.

The small antimob organization was formed about two years ago after a group of 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 Grassi was murdered and when the magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino were blown up by Mafia car bombs in 1992, Greco said.

The Mafia has again been in the spotlight recently because of the capture of Bernardo Provenzano, accused of being the Cosa Nostra's boss of bosses, on April 11. Provenzano was arrested in a dilapidated country house near his native town of Corleone, Sicily, after almost 43 years as a fugitive.

"It's a happy coincidence" that Provenzano's capture corresponds with 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."

Provenzano on Tuesday made his first public appearance since being captured, the ANSA news agency reported. Provenzano attended a Palermo court hearing by a video link from his prison in Terni, Italy. He is on trial for his role in a series of murders, including that of Grassi in 1991, when prosecutors say he was a member of the Cosa Nostra's decision-making high commission, known as the Cupola.