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# Some Italian businesses defy Mafia calls for payment

Reuters

Published: October 22, 2007

**ROME:** When the Sicilian Mafia first tried to shake down the restaurateur Vincenzo Conticello, he quoted his grandmother Ermelinda to them: "Don't start paying up or you will always be a servant, never a free man."

Unconvinced by Conticello's reason for not paying the €500, or \$715, monthly "pizzo" - protection money paid all over southern Italy and by up to 8 out of 10 businesses in parts of Sicily - the Mafia hit back with death threats and a new demand for €50,000.

A member of the fifth generation of Conticellos to run Palermo's Antica Focacceria San Francesco, the 48-year-old stood in court and pointed the finger at the men he said tried to force him to pay.

"If I had paid up, my grandmother would have turned in her grave," said Conticello, one of a tiny band of businesspeople who, partly inspired by anti-racket groups like Addiopizzo ("goodbye pizzo"), have taken a stand.

They cannot even dent the mob's earnings. It is estimated that Italian crime syndicates, including the Cosa Nostra in Sicily, the Camorra in Naples and the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria, earn €75 billion a year from the protection racket and loan sharking.

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But they hope to inspire others and eventually deprive the mob of an easy and low-risk source of cash.

"If the Mafia exists, it exists because businesses pay up," said Tano Grasso, who set up the first anti-racket group in 1990 after refusing to pay protection money for his clothing firm.

Some pay a high price for refusing to pay, none more so than Libero Grassi, a Palermo merchant who was shot and killed in 1991. Conticello has to have an armed police escort.

Others have had their premises burned down or bombed, like Andrea Vecchio, a builder who suffered four fire-bomb

attacks in four days.

Mafia experts say that the revolt against the racket coincides with a leadership vacuum in the Mafia since the 2006 arrest of the "boss of bosses," Bernardo Provenzano.

"In Sicily there's a new aggression in their reaction due to the lack of leadership, and also the fact that they need money," Grasso said from Naples, where he now campaigns against the Camorra and the pizzo.

A study by SOS Impresa, the anti-racket office of the retailers' association, estimates that Italian mobsters garner €200 million a day through pizzo and loan sharking, with shopkeepers alone squeezed for €80 million a day.








The SOS Impresa chairmann Lino Busa, believes businesses are rebelling against the pizzo "partly because the Mafia campaign to demand money has got worse and they have been using bombs." This contrasts with Provenzano's "pax mafiosi," Grasso says, when the mob would "reason with businesses to make paying the pizzo seem a reasonable thing to do, like a tax."

The godfathers were once "happy with a discount or a free pizza," Conticello said. After 2000, his business became a victim of its own success: as Conticello marketed the restaurant abroad and business grew, the Mafia's mouth watered for a slice of earnings.

"Plus, my employees go out and tell people the Focacceria pays good wages and that creates envy," Conticelli said.

Unlike the days when business leaders urged each other with fiscal logic "pay up, so we pay less," the employers' lobby Confindustria now threatens to expel members paying the pizzo.

Grassi's widow, Pina, wants those who do pay up to be prosecuted as Mafia accomplices. "But such a law will never be passed," she said on a recent anniversary of his death. "The fight against the racket will always be based on the courage of the few."

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