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Mafia-free aisle opens for shoppers



Brave ... customers shop in the "pizzo-free" store.

Photo: *AFP*

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ROME: Shoppers in Sicily have the chance to take on the Mafia after the first racket-free supermarket opened on the island long dominated by the mob.

Its owner, Fabio Messina, is taking a brave stand against the organisation by stacking his shelves with products only from firms which - like his own - have refused to pay pizzo, the local term for protection money.

"For too long ordinary citizens of Palermo and business people have been held to ransom, and now we are fighting back," said Pasquale Masucci, a computer technician who was one of the store's first customers on Friday.

The supermarket, in the heart of Palermo, is the latest initiative from the campaign group Addiopizzo ("Goodbye Pizzo"), which has been fighting racketeering since 2004.

Its campaign was launched by pasting up posters around the city overnight, bearing the slogan: "A society that pays pizzo is a society without dignity."

Police estimate the Mafia extorts more than \$A280 million a year from shops and businesses in the Palermo region. The more money a business makes, the more the godfathers expect - and those who do not pay up are quickly paid a visit.

But shoppers and businesses are rebelling, with those refusing to pay adding their names online at the Addiopizzo website. As of yesterday, 241 firms and individuals were listed.

Now Mr Messina, 29, has decided to bring them together by stocking their items in Supermercato Punto Antipizzo - literally, anti-pizzo point supermarket. He said: "I felt the time had come to give those businesses that had refused to pay the pizzo an extra economic opportunity ... we are talking about products from fruit and vegetables to wine, olive oil, pasta and bread. The sort of items you find in any normal supermarket."

Senator Francesco Ferrante, who has campaigned against Mafia racketeering, said: "With the opening of this supermarket a new symbol of rebellion and pride has been born from a category that has too often been crushed by Cosa Nostra."