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Italians saying no to paying mafia protection money

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ROME: When the Sicilian mafia first tried to shake down restaurateur Vincenzo Conticello for \$700 a month, he quoted his grandmother Ermelinda at them: "Don't start paying up or you will always be a servant, never a free man."

Unconvinced by his late granny's reason for not paying the "pizzo" - protection money paid all over southern Italy and by up to eight out of 10 businesses in parts of Sicily - the mafia hit back with death threats and a new demand for \$70,000.

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

"If I had paid up, my grandmother would have turned in her grave," said Conticello, one of a tiny band of business people who, partly inspired by antiracket youth movements such as "www.addiopizzo.org" ("goodbye pizzo"), have taken a stand.

They cannot even dent the mob's earnings. It is estimated that Italian crime syndicates - the Cosa Nostra, the Camorra in Naples and the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria - earn \$107 billion a year from the protection racket and loan sharking.

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 Palermo merchant Libero Grassi, who was shot dead in 1991.

Conticello has to have an armed police escort.

Others have had their premises burnt down or bombed, like builder Andrea Vecchio who suffered four fire-bomb attacks in four days.

Mafia experts say the revolt against the racket coincides with a leadership vacuum in the mafia since the 2006 arrest of "boss of bosses" Bernardo Provenzano. Now ambitious mafiosi on the outside want to prove themselves by enforcing the pizzo.

"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, head of the anti-pizzo movement (www.antiracket.it), said from Naples where he now campaigns against the Camorra. "I can't forecast what will happen but we definitely have to be very worried," he said.

A study by SOS Impresa, antiracket office of the retailers' association, estimates Italian mobsters bleed \$285 million a day from business via the pizzo and loan sharking, with shopkeepers alone squeezed for \$114 million a day.

SOS Impresa chairman Lino Busa believes some 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" between clans when, Grasso says, the mob would "reason with businesses to make paying the pizzo seem a reasonable thing to do, like a tax".

Firms winning lucrative public works contracts knew they would be squeezed for a fixed percentage of 2 or 3% and the small number who refused to pay were often left alone.