

Italy blasts virus panic as it eyes new testing criteria

February 27 2020, by Frances D'emilio and Nicole Winfield



Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio holds up a map of Italy showing the municipalities in regions of Lombardy and Veneto where it is not possible to travel, during a press conference at the foreign press association, in Rome, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. The government is seeking to calm fears about the outbreak, which has seen countries issue travel advisories warning their citizens to avoid visiting hard-hit Lombardy and Veneto regions, which have seen the most cases. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

With tourism tanking and panic rising, Italy tried to control the coronavirus in the realm of public perception Thursday as its outbreak grew to 650 cases and other countries took measures to limit travel to and from affected Italian regions.

Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and Health Minister Roberto Speranza appeared before foreign journalists in Rome to blame overblown media coverage for travel advisories warning visitors to stay away, event cancellations and special border screenings for people coming from hard-hit northern Italy.

"In Italy, we've gone from an epidemic risk to an 'info-demic' of confirmed disinformation, which at this moment is hitting our flow of tourists, our business and our whole economic system," Di Maio said.

While the ministers sought to put Italy's explosive experience with the virus into perspective, the national caseload kept climbing Civil protection chief Angelo Borrelli reported a new total of 650, up from 400 on Wednesday evening and three a week ago, before clusters of infections emerged in the Lombardy and Veneto regions..

Three more people with the virus died in 24 hours, bringing Italy's toll to 15, Borrelli said. Officials have said all of the patients were elderly, sick with other ailments or both.

In neighboring France, authorities on Thursday reported twenty new cases of people infected with the new virus in the past 24 hours, bringing the total in the country to 38, including two deaths. Twelve of the new patients, including three working on a military base, are all connected to two previous cases in the Oise region, north of Paris.



French President Emmanuel Macron, left, puts his arm around the shoulder of Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte and gives him a kiss on both cheeks during a joint press conference on the occasion of the first French-Italian summit in more than two years, in Naples, southern Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

As more countries reported new cases that could be linked to Italy, several adopted measures intended to keep people who might be infected out. Israel is now denying entry to all non-Israelis who visited Italy in the last two weeks, and Israeli airline El Al suspended all flights to and from Italy until March 14.

Public health officials have said that Italy contributed to fears of an epidemic in Europe with its zealousness in testing for the virus and

quickly reporting the number that came back positive from local regions.

A World Health Organization official advising the Italian government, Walter Ricciardi, said test results must be certified at the national level before they are considered official and publicly reported. Without confirmation from Italy's National Institutes of Health, "cases that emerge from the regions are still considered suspect and unconfirmed," Ricciardi said.



A couple wearing face masks, stroll outside St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. In Europe, an expanding cluster in northern Italy is eyed as a source for transmissions of the COVID-19 disease (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

It remains to be seen whether or how the higher-level review of positive tests changes Italy's case numbers. So far, none of the 282 cases analyzed by the national health institute were rejected as false positives, and Italian authorities said they suspect that almost all of the preliminary results will be confirmed, too.

Italian health officials are making another change in their testing protocols that may slow the growth of new case numbers. The country expects to limit [coronavirus](#) testing to at-risk people showing symptoms of COVID-19, said Giuseppe Ippolito, scientific director at Italy's National Institute for Infectious Diseases.

Previously, Italy was testing anyone who visited certain towns in northern Italy or came into contact with someone infected with the virus but not necessarily showing symptoms.



Bulgarian soccer team Ludogorets coach Pavel Vrba wears a protective face masks as he sits in the coach bus heading to the San Siro stadium, in Milan, Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Ludogorets is playing Italian club Inter Milan in a Europa League soccer match on Thursday that is scheduled to go ahead in an empty stadium due to the coronavirus outbreak. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



A paramedic wearing a mask gets out of a tent set up by the Italian Civil Protection outside the emergency ward of the Piacenza hospital, northern Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Italy is changing how it reports coronavirus cases and who will get tested in ways that could lower the country's caseload even as an outbreak centered in northern Italy spreads in Europe. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



From left Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio, Italy's Minister of Health Roberto Speranza, and Spallanzani Hospital Scientist Director Giuseppe Ippolito, arrive for a press conference at the foreign press association in Rome, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. The government is seeking to calm fears about the outbreak, which has seen countries issue travel advisories warning their citizens to avoid visiting hard-hit Lombardy and Veneto regions, which have seen the most cases. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



Bulgarian soccer team Ludogorets wearing protective face masks sit on a coach bus heading to the San Siro stadium, in Milan, Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Ludogorets is playing Italian club Inter Milan in a Europa League soccer match on Thursday that is scheduled to go ahead in an empty stadium due to the coronavirus outbreak. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



A woman wearing a protective mask stands at the Porta Nuova business district in Milan, Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. In Europe, an expanding cluster in northern Italy is eyed as a source for transmissions of the COVID-19 disease. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



Nuns talks to paramedics at a tent set up by the Italian Civil Protection next to the emergency ward of the Piacenza hospital, northern Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Italy is changing how it reports coronavirus cases and who will get tested in ways that could lower the country's caseload even as an outbreak centered in northern Italy spreads in Europe. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte and French President Emmanuel Macron pose for a photo with the backdrop of Mt. Vesuvius on the occasion of the first French-Italian summit in more than two years, in Naples, southern Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)



A tourist twirls around as she steps on a tiled floor mosaic depicting a bull, symbol of the city of Turin that was the first capital of the Kingdom of Italy, inside the four-story double arcade Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, completed in 1867 and named after Italy's first king, in Milan, Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. According to an old legend this will bring good luck and allow to return in the city. In Europe, an expanding cluster in northern Italy is eyed as a source for transmissions of the COVID-19 disease. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



Tourists, wearing face masks, pose for a selfie in front of a Versace shop window in downtown Milan, Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. In Europe, an expanding cluster in northern Italy is eyed as a source for transmissions. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

Ippolito said the shift corresponds with updated recommendations from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control,.

Premier Giuseppe Conte, who has been trying to manage the outbreak, took a break himself to go to Naples for a summit Thursday with French President Emmanuel Macron. The meeting served the purpose of displaying normalcy as the two leaders strolled through Naples and stopped at a cafe to sip espresso and enjoy a local sweet gushing with syrupy rum inside known as a "baba."

Macron expressed his solidarity with Italy. "This virus concerns us all," he said.

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