

Italy tries to contain virus as isolated towns hunker down (Update)

February 24 2020, by Paolo Santalucia, Giada Zampano and Nicole Winfield



A cashier wears a sanitary mask as she talks to a client in a supermarket in Casalpusterlengo, Northern Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy scrambled to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and a third death. Road blocks were set up in at least some of 10 towns in Lombardy at the epicenter of the outbreak, including in Casalpusterlengo, to keep people from leaving or arriving. (AP Photo/Paolo Santalucia)

Police manned checkpoints around quarantined towns in Italy's north on Monday and residents stocked up on food as the country became the focal point of the outbreak in Europe and fears of its cross-border spread.

Croatia, Hungary and Ireland advised against travel to the affected areas, and Italians traveling abroad began to feel the effects of a crackdown: A bus from Milan was barricaded by police in the French city of Lyon for health checks for several hours before being deemed to be virus-free and sent on its way; Alitalia passengers arriving in Mauritius were threatened with quarantine.

Civil protection officials said at least 229 people have tested positive for the virus in Italy. State television on Monday night reported the seventh death of an infected person—that of a 62-year-old man who already had serious health problems. The other six victims, also with pre-existing medical conditions, were elderly.

The majority of those known to be infected with COVID-19 hail from two main clusters—some 10 towns in Lombardy and another area in the neighboring region of Veneto. Italy has the highest number of cases outside Asia, underscoring the limits of Italy's prevention protocols, the most stringent in Europe.

Officials still hadn't pinpointed the origin of Italy's outbreak or whether the clusters were related. With the numbers rising, authorities were struggling to contain the number of cases, which by Monday had spread to a half-dozen regions and prompted Austria to temporarily halt rail traffic across its border with Italy.



A woman wearing a sanitary mask talks on the phone as she walks in the Vittorio Emanuele Gallery shopping arcade, in downtown Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. At least 190 people in Italy's north have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus and four people have died, including an 84-year-old man who died overnight in Bergamo, the Lombardy regional government reported. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)

"These rapid developments over the weekend have shown how quickly this situation can change," EU Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides said in Brussels. "We need to take this situation of course very seriously, but we must not give in to panic, and, even more importantly, to disinformation."

On Tuesday, Kyriakides will meet in Rome with Italy's health ministers,

those from bordering countries—Austria, France, Slovenia and Switzerland, as well as the ministers from Germany and Croatia.

For Italians barricaded in the dozen small towns around the two main clusters of the outbreak, the outlook for the next two weeks appeared bleak, with the only order of business getting enough food in the house, keeping distance from one another and getting tested.

"This wasn't a very exciting place to begin with," said Andrea Casalis, a 27-year-old from Vo'Euganeo, a town of 3,500 people at the epicenter of the Veneto cluster. "Since we can't go to the bar, there's no much left to do."



Police officers control the road to Vo' Euganeo, a town of 3,500 people at the epicenter of the Veneto cluster, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Police manned

checkpoints around quarantined towns in Italy's north on Monday and residents stocked up on food as the country became the focal point of the virus outbreak in Europe and fears of its cross-border spread. (AP Photo/Andrea Casalis)

Casalis had been due to start a new job in the food sector a few miles out of town, but that is now on hold—evidence of the cascading economic effect the outbreak is beginning to wreak on the northern powerhouse of Italy's economy.

"I try to stay optimistic, but the perception of what's going on changes subjectively," he said.

While Italian authorities canceled soccer matches, Masses and closed schools, museums, theaters and even Venice's famed Carnival, they also sought to calm fears by noting the virus' low mortality rate.

Speaking on state-run RAI news, virologist Ilaria Capua of the University of Florida noted that Italy's high number of cases were due to the fact that Italy was "actively seeking them out." More than 3,000 people have been tested for the virus, most of whom had direct contact with those infected.



A woman wearing a sanitary mask walks at the Centrale main railway station in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy has been scrambling to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and a third death, calling off the popular Venice Carnival, scrapping major league soccer matches in the stricken area and shuttering theaters, including Milan's legendary La Scala. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

"It is likely that the more we look, the more we will find," Capua said. But she stressed that the majority of cases likely wouldn't even require a doctor's visit and that Italy's numbers are "very analogous to what we will see in many other European countries."

Civil protection officials insisted that Italy was still a safe place to visit.

Veneto regional president Luca Zaia lamented that he never imagined he would ever have to cancel Venice's Carnival—another economic blow to the famed lagoon city that already saw tourism plummet after last year's floods.

Italy, however, wasn't taking chances and effectively sealed off a dozen northern towns where more than 200 of the cases were found. On Monday, police wearing face masks manned checkpoints along the road into Codogno, southeast of Milan, where the first patient to test positive for the virus was hospitalized last week.



An Italian tax police officer talks to a man wearing a sanitary mask at a road block set in Casalpuusterlengo, Northern Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy scrambled to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and a third death. Road blocks were set up in at least some of 10 towns in Lombardy at the epicenter of the

outbreak, including in Casalpusterlengo, to keep people from leaving or arriving. (AP Photo/Paolo Santalucia)

Residents wearing face masks and gloves lined up at Codogno's supermarket to stock up on food, only to find out the market was still closed on orders of the mayor. Later, groups of four at a time were allowed into the bakery in nearby Casalpusterlengo, and one at a time into the pharmacy.

Italian farm lobby Coldiretti reported a 5%-10% increase in fresh fruit and produce purchases this weekend across the country, as Italians stocked up fearing possible future quarantines even in regions that hadn't registered any cases. Hand disinfectant and face masks were in short supply; in Genoa—which hasn't had any cases—the supermarket shelves were empty.

Civil protection chief Angelo Borrelli acknowledged that there were some supply issues with the virus test kits, and Lombardy officials announced they were no longer automatically testing people who had come into contact with infected patients. Those people were placed on home quarantine under monitoring, and were only tested if they showed symptoms, said regional health official Giulio Gallera.



Tourists, some of them wearing sanitary masks, stand next to the Vittorio Emanuele Gallery in downtown Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy has been scrambling to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and a third death, calling off the popular Venice Carnival, scrapping major league soccer matches in the stricken area and shuttering theaters, including Milan's legendary La Scala. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



Italian soldiers wearing sanitary masks patrol Duomo square in downtown Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. At least 190 people in Italy's north have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus and four people have died, including an 84-year-old man who died overnight in Bergamo, the Lombardy regional government reported. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



A man wearing a sanitary mask holds a smartphone at the Centrale main railway station in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy has been scrambling to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and a third death, calling off the popular Venice Carnival, scrapping major league soccer matches in the stricken area and shuttering theaters, including Milan's legendary La Scala. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



People wearing sanitary masks sit as they wait at the Centrale main railway station in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy has been scrambling to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and a third death, calling off the popular Venice Carnival, scrapping major league soccer matches in the stricken area and shuttering theaters, including Milan's legendary La Scala. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



European Commissioner for Health Stella Kyriakides listens to a question during a news conference at the EU headquarters in Brussels, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. The European Union's top health and crisis management officials called for vigilance Monday, saying the spread of the virus in Italy shows how quickly things can change, but they urged citizens not to panic and said there is no plan to close any of Europe's borders. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)



People wearing sanitary masks walk at the Centrale main railway station in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy has been scrambling to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and a third death, calling off the popular Venice Carnival, scrapping major league soccer matches in the stricken area and shuttering theaters, including Milan's legendary La Scala. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



A woman wearing a sanitary mask sits in a streetcar in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. At least 190 people in Italy's north have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus and four people have died, including an 84-year-old man who died overnight in Bergamo, the Lombardy regional government reported. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



People wearing sanitary masks take a selfie in front of the Duomo gothic cathedral, in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. At least 190 people in Italy's north have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus and four people have died, including an 84-year-old man who died overnight in Bergamo, the Lombardy regional government reported. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



A tax police officer wearing a sanitary mask talks to a driver at a road block in Casalpuusterlengo, Northern Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy scrambled to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections. Road blocks were set up in at least some of 10 towns in Lombardy at the epicenter of the outbreak, to keep people from leaving or arriving. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



A shop assistant wears a sanitary mask in a clothing shop in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Police manned checkpoints around quarantined towns in Italy's north on Monday as authorities sought to contain cases of COVID-19 virus that have made Italy the focal point of the outbreak in Europe and fears of its cross-border spread. At least 190 people in Italy's north have tested positive for the virus and four people have died, including an 84-year-old man who died overnight in Bergamo, the Lombardy regional government reported. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)



A Carabinieri (Italian paramilitary police) officer talks to a farmer on a tractor at a road block in Zorlesco, Northern Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy scrambled to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections. Road blocks were set up in at least some of 10 towns in Lombardy at the epicenter of the outbreak, to keep people from leaving or arriving. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



Carabinieri (Italian paramilitary police) officers set a road block in Zorlesco, Northern Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy scrambled to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections. Road blocks were set up in at least some of 10 towns in Lombardy at the epicenter of the outbreak, to keep people from leaving or arriving. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



A man wearing a sanitary mask walks past the Duomo gothic cathedral in Milan, Italy, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Italy has been scrambling to check the spread of Europe's first major outbreak of the new viral disease amid rapidly rising numbers of infections and calling off the popular Venice Carnival, scrapping major league soccer matches in the stricken area and shuttering theaters, including Milan's legendary La Scala. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

Railroad authorities reported delays or cancellations affecting high-speed and other long-distance trains from north to south, blamed on the need to do health checks in railroad structures along the routes, including those passing through one of the quarantined towns in Lombardy. State railways was offering full reimbursement of tickets for travelers who didn't want to travel due the virus outbreak.

Until last week, Italy only had registered three people who tested positive for the virus, including a Chinese couple visiting from Wuhan. They have been recovering at Rome's infectious disease hospital.

A joint team from the World Health Organization and the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control were set to visit Italy.

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