

Czechs send Italy replacements for seized masks

March 23 2020

Czech authorities said Monday they had sent 110,000 face masks to Italy as compensation for a contingent seized from traffickers that turned out to be part of a donation from China to Italy.

Described as a "theft" by some media, the seizure angered Italy, currently the global epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic with almost 5,500 deaths and its hospitals at breaking point.

There is a massive shortage of protective medical gear in Europe, including the face masks and hazmat suits that medical personnel need to lower the risk of infection with the deadly novel coronavirus.

"We've just sent 110,000 face masks to Italy by bus heading to Rome... along with 43 Italian tourists who could not get back home," Foreign Minister Tomas Petricek told AFP.

"The Czech Republic certainly didn't steal anything," Petricek said, adding that Prague had sent 10,000 more replacement masks of the "same type".

The Italian daily La Repubblica wrote on Saturday that Czech authorities seized Chinese masks intended for Italy's hospitals under guise of a sting against traffickers, in an article titled: "How the Czech Republic sequestered thousands of masks sent from China to Italy."

Petricek said that someone had torn a sign off the Czech consulate in

Milan. "I can understand the reaction following the information in the media," he said.

The sting against medical goods traffickers occurred on March 17 as the Czech Republic tightened controls on the export and distribution of medical materials.

Czech police seized 680,000 face masks and respirators from a warehouse of a private company in Lovosice, north of Prague, including just over 100,000 masks donated by China to Italy.

Petricek said police were investigating how the face masks had ended up in the warehouse in Lovosice.

"To be quite frank, Lovosice is not quite en route from China to Italy," Petricek told AFP.

Prague has asked Czechs to remain at home and made wearing face masks mandatory for anyone venturing outside for necessities.

The EU country of 10.7 million people so far has 1,165 confirmed cases and one death.

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Citation: Czechs send Italy replacements for seized masks (2020, March 23) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-czechs-italy-seized-masks.html>

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