

Italy's Conte warns of 'riskiest weeks', urges EU unity

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Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte warned Monday that his country was entering "the riskiest weeks" and urged a coordinated European response to the coronavirus pandemic.

"European coordination on health and economic measures is needed," Conte told the Corriere della Sera newspaper ahead of a planned videoconference Monday between Group of Seven (G7) leaders.

"It is time for courageous choices and Italy can offer a significant contribution as the country that was the first in Europe to have have experienced such a wide spread of the virus," he said.

Italy was the first EU member state to shutter schools and almost all businesses to try to slow a global pandemic that has killed 1,809 people in the Mediterranean country since last month.

It has recorded more than half the deaths officially reported outside China.

Conte said "no new prohibitions are needed" but urged everyone to stay home as much as possible and only venture outside alone.

"Scientists tell us that we have not yet reached the peak. These are the riskiest weeks and we need the utmost precaution," said Conte.

Italy is facing two simultaneous threats to its healthcare system.

World-class hospitals in the richer north where the overwhelming majority of the deaths and infections have been reported are running out of beds and relying on overstretched staff.

But Conte fears that medical centres in the poorer south which has largely avoided contagion will be unable to cope should it be hit just as hard.

"We can no longer afford behavioural errors," said Conte.

"Things like people leaving Milan on weekends to spend time with their family or at their residences in the south must absolutely stop."

The virus "is our most important challenge of the past decades," Conte said.

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