

Italy sees signs of hope in 651 new virus deaths

March 22 2020



This scanning electron microscope image shows SARS-CoV-2 (yellow)—also known as 2019-nCoV, the virus that causes COVID-19—isolated from a patient, emerging from the surface of cells (blue/pink) cultured in the lab. Credit: NIAID-RML

Italian health officials voiced cautious hope Sunday after the coronavirus

death toll edged down from the previous day's world record and the rate of infections slowed.

The Mediterranean country's world-topping toll from its month-long crisis approached 5,500 and the number of COVID-19 infections neared 60,000.

But top health officials sounded—while not upbeat—encouraged to see daily deaths fall back from Saturday's grisly 793 to a slightly less shocking 651.

The number of new infections rose by a relatively modest 10.4 percent.

"The figures announced today are lower than those for yesterday," Italian civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli told reporters.

"I hope and we all hope that these figures can be borne out in the coming days. But do not let your guard down."

National sacrifice

Italy has sacrificed its economy and liberties by shutting down and banning almost everything to halt the spread of a virus the government views as an [existential threat](#).

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte took the extra step Saturday of announcing plans to close "non-essential" factories until April 3.

Conte has also indicated that the national lockdown will almost certainly be extended for an unknown number of weeks or even months.

Police fines for those wondering the streets without a good excuse have been cranked up in the hardest-hit north around Milan from 206 euros to

5,000 euros (\$5,360).

Saturday's record death toll suggested that everything the Italian authorities were trying was failing.

Sunday's numbers suddenly gave them hope.

"We must not get too enthusiastic or over-interpret things," the government's scientific committee expert Franco Locatelli cautioned.

But, he added: "It is a sign that we welcome positively".

Italy's toll since the day the first European died of COVID-19 in Milan's Lombardy region on February 21 now stands at 5,476.

'Glass half full'

"These figures are always a matter of either seeing the glass as half full or half empty," said Lombardy's regional health chief Giulio Gallera.

"Today, the glass is half full. But we are not declaring victory just yet."

Containment measures around Lombardy have been in effect since March 8—five days longer than for Italy as a whole.

Some of the local measures around Milan's financial district and surrounding towns are even stricter than those for Italy as a whole.

Lombardy governor Attilio Fontana created international headlines on Saturday by banning jogging.

Both local and national officials pleaded with Italians while announcing their restrictions to give up their freedoms for the nation's good for two

weeks.

The two-week deadline in Lombardy expired on Sunday.

The stakes were high—and the new numbers showed the measures might just be bearing fruit.

Milan's region reported just 30.4 percent of Italy's new infections on Sunday.

It had reported 51.6 percent of the infections on March 8.

It had also been reporting about two-thirds of Italy's [coronavirus](#) deaths throughout the crisis.

The region of 10 million officially registered 55.5 percent of Sunday's COVID-19 deaths.

Yet a range of other statistics pointed to a world-class healthcare system that was being tested to the utmost.

Sunday's figures showed the number of patients receiving intensive care rising above 3,000 for the first time.

There were just 650 intensive care patients with COVID-19 two weeks ago.

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