

Italy hopes virus is easing but fears new onslaught in south

March 27 2020, by Nicole Winfield, Colleen Barry and Trisha Thomas



In this March 23, 2020 file photo, coffins are placed on scaffolding in the Crematorium Temple of Piacenza, northern Italy, awaiting cremation due to the coronavirus emergency. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (Claudio

Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

Doctors and nurses in Italy's overwhelmed northern hospitals have welcomed a slight stabilizing in the number of coronavirus infections but fear the virus is still silently spreading in the country's south 2 1/2 weeks into the West's most extreme nationwide shutdown.

As the dead in Italy keep piling up, virologists warn that the actual number of cases could be up to more than five times as high as the official count, which reached just shy of 86,500 on Friday. That means infections will still climb even with Italians ordered to stay home for all but essential activity.

Italy, one of the hot spots in the global pandemic, has by far the most virus deaths of any nation in the world, a grim tally that reached 9,134 as of Friday. Italy also surpassed China in its number of confirmed cases and has more than any nation besides the United States, which outpaced China in total cases on Thursday.

"It is something devastating," said the Rev. Mario Carminati, who has turned over a church in the tiny Lombard town of Seriate to host coffins before they are taken by military convoy to be cremated. This week, dozens were lined up in two neat rows down the central aisle, and were immediately replaced by new ones when they were taken away.

"At least the relatives and family know that someone is taking care of them, with a prayer and a benediction before they are taken away," he said.



In this Thursday, March 26, 2020 photo, a red rose lies on a coffin lined up along others inside the San Giuseppe church in Seriate, one of the areas worst hit by coronavirus, near Bergamo, Italy, mark spaces where coffins are to be placed before being taken to a crematory. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

Despite the toll, officials have also expressed cautious optimism that the exponential spread of the virus is starting to slow in the hard-hit north, thanks to two weeks of military-enforced stay-at-home orders. For

several days this week, new infections and deaths showed signs of slowing down, and emergency rooms weren't seeing the tsunami of sick that characterized the first weeks of the pandemic following Italy's first positive test Feb. 20.

"The numbers are still high, but for a few days now the numbers have stopped rising, thank God," said Dr. Luca Lorini, head of intensive care at the Pope John XXIII hospital in Bergamo, one of the hardest hit of Italy's public hospitals.

Some 500 medical personnel at the hospital are infected, and Lorini said he has found himself treating colleagues, friends, children of friends and parents of friends in his overwhelmed 88-bed ICU that serves a city of 120,000.

He marvels that he is still standing and wonders if maybe he was infected early on with slight symptoms and developed immunity. Nationwide, at least 50 doctors have died and 6,414 medical personnel have tested positive



In this Tuesday, March 17, 2020. filer, relatives walk behind a hearse carrying a coffin inside the Monumentale cemetery, in Bergamo, the heart of the hardest-hit province in Italy's hardest-hit region of Lombardy, Italy. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno, File)

"We know it before we go into battle, and we accept it," Lorini told The Associated Press.

Elsewhere in Bergamo, the Italian army's Alpini mountaineering forces

are building a field hospital to be staffed, in part, by some of the 150 medical personnel sent by Russia, one of only a handful of countries along with China and Cuba to respond to Italy's urgent appeal for medical equipment, protective masks and personnel.

But the need is also growing in the south, where hospitals are even less prepared and equipped than the prosperous north. In one week, Puglia in the "heel" of the Italian peninsula went from 478 cases to 1,182, with a doubling of ICU patients. Campania also doubled its caseload to 1,310 and tripled the number of people in ICUs.

"It's a matter of hours, not days," the governor of the Campania region that includes Naples wrote to the central government, complaining that his urgent requests for ventilators had gone unheeded. "There is a real chance of adding a tragedy of the south to the tragedy of the north."



In this Tuesday, March 17, 2020 file photo, pallbearers stand outside the Monumentale cemetery, in Bergamo, the heart of the hardest-hit province in Italy's hardest-hit region of Lombardy, Italy. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno, File)

Cateno De Luca, mayor of the Sicilian city of Messina, took the extraordinary step of recording a warning to residents in his nasal, gravelly voice for drones to play as they fly over the seaside city monitoring residents' movements.

"Don't go outside! That is an order from Mayor De Luca!" the drone blasts.

Italy's high death toll and the virus' aggressive spread in the country has led Italian epidemiologists to estimate that the true number of infected people could be as high as 450,000 and to say that under-testing is putting Italians at risk of infection. Currently, Italy only tests people showing symptoms, because its labs cannot process any more, and to date nearly 395,000 tests have been performed.

Virologist Dr. Andrea Crisanti, director of molecular medicine at the University of Padua and a consultant for the Veneto regional government, points to the only controlled epidemiological study done in the outbreak, in the tiny Veneto town of Vo'Euganeo, as evidence that Italy's true numbers of infection are much higher—and that the risk of

not testing more widely is enormous.



In this March 26, 2020 file photo, numbers on the floor inside the San Giuseppe church in Seriate, one of the areas worst hit by coronavirus, near Bergamo, Italy, mark spaces where coffins are to be placed before being taken to a crematory. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Antonio Calanni, file)

Italy recorded its first death in Vo, and the town was locked down Feb. 22 and the entire population of 3,300 tested. According to the study, 3% of Vo's residents were infected, but between 50%-75% of them were

asymptomatic. But because all positive cases were identified, isolated and quarantined, regardless of whether they were symptomatic, Vo has seen its new infections crumble.

"This tiny town has taught us a lot," Crisanti told state-run RAI radio.

Crisanti said the Vo study showed that even asymptomatic people transmit the virus, since the few new infections registered between tests were within households of asymptomatic people. The only way to stop the spread, he told RAI, is more testing, active surveillance of all positive cases and quarantine.

Based on the Vo results, Veneto Gov. Luca Zaia is planning to vastly ramp up testing across the region, aiming to reach 20,000 tests a day and hand out protective masks to each family. Already, Veneto has tested more than 83,000 people, and compared to hard-hit Lombardy next door, has a comparatively low mortality rate with 313 dead and 7,497 positive cases.



In this March 26, 2020 file photo, Italian Army Alpini corps take a break as they prepare a new hospital in the spaces of the Bergamo Fair, in Bergamo Italy. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno, file)

The government on March 10 imposed a nationwide lockdown after an initial quarantine of a dozen small towns in Lombardy and Veneto failed to stop the spread of the virus. On Thursday, Italy idled all non-essential production and industry, the most widespread manufacturing shutdown in the world.

The industrial lobby Confindustria has estimated it could cost 70 billion-to-100 billion euros (\$77 billion-\$110 billion) of national wealth a month if 70% of companies are closed.

Two weeks in, the measures appear to be having their effect on the virus, slowing new infections and relieving pressure on the health system. By Friday, nearly 11,000 of Italy's 86,500 infected had been cured.

The president of Italy's National Institutes of Health, Dr. Silvio Brusaferro, said Friday that Italy hadn't yet reached the peak of its infection curve or begun to see a decline. But he said: "What we have are signs of a slowing that makes us think that we are close."



In this March 26, 2020 file photo, military trucks carrying coffins of deceased people are escorted on the highway next to Ponte Oglio, near Bergamo, one of

the areas worst hit by the coronavirus infection, on their way from Bergamo cemetery to a crematory in some other location as the local crematory exceeded its maximum capacity. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno, file)



In this March 21, 2020 file photo, coffins are downloaded at the Ferrara cemetery, northern Italy, from a military convoy coming from Bergamo, a city at the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in northern Italy. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south

after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (Massimo Paolone/LaPresse via AP, file)



In this March 26, 2020 file photo, coffins are lined up on the floor in the San Giuseppe church in Seriate, one of the areas worst hit by coronavirus, near Bergamo, Italy, waiting to be taken to a crematory. Italy is seeing a slight stabilizing in its confirmed coronavirus infections two weeks into the world's most extreme nationwide shutdown, but the virus is taking its silent spread south after having ravaged the health care system in the north. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Antonio Calanni, file)

Twenty days after coming down with a fever, and after nearly a week in an air-pressurized helmet pumping oxygen into his virus-ravaged lungs, Fausto Russo is now breathing on his own and hopes to go home as early as Sunday from the Santa Maria Goretti hospital in Latina, near Rome.

"It's a horrible sensation, not being able to breathe," said Russo, a 38-year-old fitness trainer. "Imagine putting your head under water."

Lorini, the doctor, knows well the toll that the virus takes on both patients and hospital staff. When he goes home each night, a five-minute walk from the hospital, he allows himself a few minutes to listen to music and "unplug" from the intensity of the ICU ward.

His current favorite song is Bruce Springsteen's "Secret Garden." He smiles as he thinks about the lyrics. "You've gone a million miles/ How far'd you get/ To that place where/ You can't remember/ And you can't forget."

"Listen to it today," Lorini suggested. "It will give you a sense of tenderness."

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