

# Italy's virus toll shoots back up, but medics see hope

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Italy's daily COVID-19 death toll shot back up Tuesday, but more evidence emerged that the coronavirus infection rate is slowing thanks to a painful national lockdown.

Health officials across the ravaged Mediterranean country are poring over every new piece of data to see whether two weeks of bans and closures have made a dent in the crisis.

The harshest restrictions are theoretically due to expire on Wednesday evening—although the government is all but certain to extend them in some form for weeks or even months.

Italy's 743 new deaths broke two days of successive declines that had taken the number down to 601 on Monday.

It set a [world record](#) of 793 fatalities on Saturday.

But the rate of officially registered new infections was just eight percent—the same as Monday and the lowest level since Italy registered its first death on February 21.

It had been as high as 50 percent at the start of March.

"The measures we took two weeks ago are starting to have an effect," civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli told the daily La Repubblica before Tuesday's toll came out.

He said more data over the next few days will help show "if the growth curve is really flattening."

Few scientists expect Italy's numbers—if they really are dropping—to follow a steady downward line.

The slowing contagion rate is offering a ray of hope in the midst of a global crisis that is deepening in parts of Europe and the United States.

Scientists believe that countries such as Spain and France are following

in Italy's footsteps with a lag of a few weeks.

The numbers from the US are also similar to those of Italy's from about 20 days ago.

Most other European nations and some US states have followed Italy's example and imposed their own containment and social distancing measures designed to stop the spread.

## **Eyes on Italy**

The data that Borrelli has gathered from Italy's 22 regions are of crucial interest to global policy makers and medical experts.

They are however extremely reluctant to draw any definitive conclusions from the two-day drop.

Italy's daily deaths are still higher than those officially recorded in China at the peak of its crisis in Wuhan's central Hubei province.

They are also higher than those seen anywhere else in the world.

Italian officials are using the downward trend in infections to double down on their insistence that people stay home at all times, no matter the personal discomfort or economic pain.

Most big global banks think Italy has already entered a deep economic recession that could be more severe than anything seen in decades.

The Lombardy region around Milan at the epicentre of the pandemic has begun imposing 5,000 euro (\$5,400) fines on those venturing outdoors without a good excuse.

Borrelli said he supported the measures because it was "credible" to assume that the infection rate is 10 times the reported number.

Italy is perplexed over how it managed to become the global epicentre of a pandemic that began on the other side of the world.

Without blaming anyone or any single factor, Borrelli said: "From the very start, people were behaving in a way that fuelled the national problem."

But he did point to a Champions League match between Italy's Atalanta and Spain's Valencia's football clubs in Milan's San Siro stadium on February 19 as a particularly egregious mistake.

It was attended by 40,000 fans who celebrated the local team's win deep into the night.

"We can now say, with hindsight, that it was potentially a detonator," Borrelli said of the match.

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