

Italy starts first weekend under shutdown

March 14 2020

Views of empty streets, shuttered shops and a heavy silence greeted Italians from their windows on Saturday morning as the country spends its first weekend under lockdown in a bid to contain its coronavirus outbreak.

Since Monday the country, which has recorded 17,660 infections and 1,266 deaths from the virus, has enacted a set of sweeping measures which have left millions virtually confined to their homes and shut down large parts of the economy.

However, late on Friday Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte insisted that "Italy is not stopping" after a meeting with unions and businesses where security procedures were agreed to protect those Italians still going to work.

Italian media report that the government is expected this weekend to announce details of further measures to soften the shock to the economy, including moratoriums on loan payments, extending tax deadlines and making sure self-isolation is covered under [sick leave](#).

The spate of measures curbing almost every aspect of daily life has nonetheless continued.

The latest came when city authorities in Milan and Rome decided as of Saturday to shut enclosed parks and gardens to prevent people gathering at close quarters.

However, larger open spaces such as Rome's 80-hectare Villa Borghese will remain open as long as visitors remain a metre apart, as [physical exercise](#) is one of reasons for movement deemed "essential" under the new rules.

Rome's historic centre was once again almost completely deserted on Saturday, with empty buses among the few vehicles on the roads.

On Friday evening the normally bustling Trastevere quarter had the air of a ghost town, with only the odd dog walker on the streets and snatches of conversation from residents' windows breaking the silence.

The last service from Rome's Ciampino airport—a Ryanair flight to Nuremberg—left on Friday night before the facility shut to [passenger traffic](#) until further notice.

The capital's bigger Fiumicino airport is still running but its Terminal 1 will be closed on Tuesday.

'Solidarity and prayer'

Meanwhile, according to Italy's civil protection department, the outbreak is showing signs of easing in the eleven towns in the north which were the first to be put under quarantine last month.

But authorities are worried that a new wave of cases could follow the events of the last weekend, when crowds of visitors descended on beaches and ski resorts in the north despite the isolation measures.

In the latest of several such cases, police in Rome said on Saturday morning that they had seized a batch of home-made face masks which contravened product standards. A further 700 masks for sale at inflated prices were also confiscated.

But the crisis is also bringing out examples of social solidarity, with many Italians taking to their balconies on Friday night to sing in unison and raise morale.

Italians are being encouraged to repeat the initiative on Saturday evening and at midday some could be seen responding to another call on social media to applaud at their windows in appreciation of health workers fighting the disease.

For its part, the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere will be ringing its bells at 8pm, along with all the other churches in the quarter, "in an expression of affinity, solidarity and prayer" with all those affected by the virus.

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Citation: Italy starts first weekend under shutdown (2020, March 14) retrieved 4 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-italy-weekend-shutdown.html>

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