

# Italy's virus deaths jump to 636 after big drop

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Italy's coronavirus death toll shot up on Monday from its lowest level in more than two weeks and officials sounded a more cautious note than earlier about a possibly easing of restrictions.

The civil protection service said the daily number of official COVID-19 deaths rose to 636 on Monday from 525 the day before.

Sunday's toll was the lowest since March 19. It also represented a drop of 23 percent from the 681 deaths reported on Saturday.

Italy's leading health officials had called Sunday's drop an important data point that could potentially lead to an easing of the country's strict month-long lockdown.

But civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli said Monday that the data were still being carefully assessed and that any definitive ruling was premature.

"The technical-scientific committee is currently carrying out its evaluations. Then, it will be up to the political decision makers," Borrelli told reporters.

He said the scientists will draw their conclusions about how to proceed "in due time".

Italy's current lockdown has been officially extended to April 13.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has repeatedly stressed that businesses will only be allowed to open up gradually and that many of the current social distancing measures will stay in place for some time.

But he has refrained from saying when this might happen. Some officials have suggested that most of the current measures will be extended until at least the start of May.

Italy's world-leading official death toll now stands at 16,523.

Yet some of the data released Monday looked encouraging.

The daily rise in new infections dropped to a record low of just 2.8 percent.

The number of people receiving intensive care treatment for COVID-19 fell for a third successive day.

But the number of non-critical patients in hospital rose back up after its first decline since the crisis began.

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