Vacationers, migrants drive Italy's surge in COVID cases

August 23 2020, by Frances D'emilio

In this Aug. 17, 2020 file photo, a medical worker wearing protective gear collects a swab from a person sitting inside a car during Covid-19 tests at the the Santa Maria della Pieta' health center in Rome. Vacationers returning from Mediterranean Sea resorts abroad as well as on the Italian island of Sardinia have accounted for upward leaps in daily new case numbers. On Saturday, Italy registered 1,071 new cases, the highest daily number since mid-May, and only weeks after the nation had seen the number of day-to-day new infections plunge to about 200. (AP Photo/Riccardo De Luca)

Sicily's governor has ordered all migrant residences on the Italian island to be shut down by Monday, part of a push-back by Italian regions alarmed by a surge in COVID-19 cases a few weeks before schools are to reopen.

But while some new migrants have tested positive, vacationers returning from Mediterranean Sea resorts abroad as well from the Italian island of Sardinia lately have accounted for far more of Italy's new coronavirus infections.

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The Lazio region, which includes Rome, surpassed hard-hit Lombardy on Saturday for the highest daily new caseload, as returning travelers got tested at Rome-area airports and a port north of the Italian capital.

On the mainland, most of the latest cases were linked to travelers coming from abroad. Those arriving from Spain, Malta, Greece and Croatia must be tested within 48 hours of entering Italy, after those places started experiencing worrisome upticks in coronavirus infections.

And many recent coronavirus clusters have been traced to people who vacationed on Sardinia. With many people taking ferries from Sardinia to the Italian mainland, Lazio set up a testing facility at Civitavecchia's dock, so those driving vehicles off the boats could line up for immediate testing.

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Lazio Gov. Nicola Zingaretti appealed to the governor of Sardinia to test vacationers before they sail or fly from the island to the mainland, saying his region would do the same for travelers leaving for Sardinia.

In Sicily, Gov. Nello Musumeci's ordinance took effect on Sunday,

requiring all migrants who reach the island by sea be transferred off as part of measures to combat the spread of COVID-19.

It stipulates that all centers housing migrants awaiting processing of asylum applications be shut down by the end of Monday. His order, effective through Sept. 10, also forbids any boat, including charity vessels, to bring migrants to the island.

But the national government, not regional governors, are in charge of migrant policies and Musumeci acknowledged that his directive might be challenged in court.

In this file photo taken on July 27, 2020, migrants arrive in Porto Empedocle, Sicily, aboard two military ships after being transferred from the island of Lampedusa. Sicily's governor has ordered all migrants to be transferred from the

island by Monday, part of push-back by Italian regions alarmed by last week's surge in COVID-19 cases. On Saturday, Italy registered 1,071 new cases, the highest daily number since mid-May, and only weeks after the nation had seen the number of day-to-day new infections plunge to about 200. (Fabio Peonia/LaPresse via AP)

On Saturday, migrants accounted for 16 of Sicily's 48 confirmed infections.

Although in past years, nearly all migrants reaching Italy by sea were rescued by humanitarian groups, cargo ships or military vessels, this year, nearly 80% of arrivals reached Italian shores on their own, most setting sail from Tunisia.

Many come ashore on tiny Lampedusa island, whose migrant residence is dangerously overcrowded. Italy has taken to quarantining the latest arrivals aboard chartered ferries offshore Sicily.

"I can't ask our people to keep a (safe) distance, wear masks and do other measures while the state amasses people in two rooms," Musumeci said, referring to the migrant centers.

Gov. Vincenzo De Luca, who leads the Campania region including Naples, raised the possibility that if the daily infections numbers become "alarming, we'll ask the government to bring back the limits" on traveling between regions that were in force through much of Italy's lockdown.

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Some wrote off De Luca's warning as posturing before gubernatorial elections in several regions, including his own, in September.

"What is he going to do, send in the Carabinieri (to block those outside his region from entering)?" Tuscany Gov. Enrico Rossi told the Corriere

della Sera newspaper.