

Vaccine rollout hampered in hard-hit northern Italy

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The vaccine rollout in Italy's hardest-hit region has been badly hampered by faulty booking systems, media reported Monday, with at least one injection centre nearly empty at the weekend.

Problems with scheduling in the northern region of Lombardy were

reported as Italy was poised to receive a million new doses of Pfizer vaccine on Tuesday for distribution country-wide.

Infection rates remain stubbornly high in Lombardy, the country's economic engine that includes Milan, and local officials said the vaccination programme there had been badly delayed since the beginning of the rollout.

It's been "a disaster, since the start", the mayor of the city of Crema, Stefania Bonaldi, told La Repubblica newspaper.

"There is a bug in the system that needs fixing."

A vaccination centre in the provincial capital Cremona was nearly empty over the weekend after people were not informed of their vaccine appointments.

Similar problems were reported in the Como and Brianza provinces.

Local officials scrambled to inform residents by calling them after looking up phone numbers in the civil registry, and one mayor borrowed a mini-van to pick up the elderly from their homes, La Repubblica reported.

Lombardy's president Attilio Fontana said he asked the board of Aria, the regionally-owned company that manages vaccination bookings, to resign over the fiasco.

According to far-right leader Matteo Salvini, whose League party runs Lombardy as part of a conservative coalition, bookings will in future be entrusted to national post company Poste Italiane.

The change should happen by week's end, he told reporters in Milan.

Regional discrepancies

Italy, where close to 105,000 people have died from the coronavirus, has reported vaccine delays across the country. These have only partly been due to the supply shortage that has affected most of Europe.

The government's coronavirus crisis commission said on Monday that one million doses of Pfizer vaccine would be distributed to 214 health facilities throughout the country by the end of the day Tuesday, the largest vaccine delivery yet in March.

According to health ministry data, the country has administered 7.8 million doses and fully vaccinated just under 2.5 million people—around 4.1 percent of the total population of 60 million.

There have also been major discrepancies across the country in terms of vaccinating the elderly.

The percentage of people over 80 who have been fully vaccinated ranges from 36.5 percent in South Tyrol to 2.6 percent in Sardinia, according to the GIMBE independent health think-tank.

Prime Minister Mario Draghi, who took office last month promising to use "all means" to fight the pandemic, has pledged a massive scale up of the immunisation campaign.

Speaking last week, he admitted that the regions "are all over the place (with vaccinations) and this is not good".

The government has set a target to triple vaccinations to 500,000 per day by mid-April, and to fully vaccinate 80 percent of the population by mid-September.

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