

In Europe, retirement homes at risk from virus 'timebomb'

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In Italy, Spain and France, old people's homes have been ravaged by coronavirus with the elderly and the infirm taking the brunt of the epidemic as it spreads like wildfire across Europe.

"When the virus enters these places, it inevitably turns into a massacre, as unfortunately is already happening in different parts of Italy," Italian pensioners' union SPI-Cgil said this weekend.

"Retirement homes are ticking time bombs, with 500,000 elderly people in very fragile conditions at risk of being infected."

After Japan, Italy has the world's second most-[elderly population](#), which goes some way to explaining the record number of deaths there from COVID-19, with Monday's toll passing 6,000.

And there is a similar situation in Spain, also one of the worst-hit countries in the world, where troops who were sent in to help out found shocking scenes at [residential homes](#) for the elderly.

"In some places, the army found some elderly people completely abandoned, sometimes even dead in their beds," said Spanish Defence Minister Margarita Robles on Monday.

Spanish prosecutors have opened an inquiry; separately they are also looking into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of 19 [elderly people](#) found last week at a residential [home](#) in Madrid.

And dozens more have died at [retirement homes](#) across the country in similar circumstances.

In France, the epidemic "could end up causing more than 100,000 deaths," the main associations representing elderly care homes have warned in a letter to the health minister.

There too the number of cases is growing, with a retirement home in the eastern Vosges area confirming Monday that 20 people had died, most likely from COVID-19.

Visitors banned

To head off a huge increase in deaths, the Spanish government has sent in the army to disinfect all such sites and has brought all private facilities into the ambit of the regional governments.

Strict visitor limitations have also been imposed on retirement homes in Spain, France, Italy, Luxembourg and most of the countries in central Europe and the Baltic states.

"It's very hard for the families not knowing what's happening inside," admitted Pauline, a teacher who did not want to give her family name but whose mother is living in an elderly care home in Paris where the virus has been detected.

And the situation is made even worse because retirement home staff "are not properly equipped with individual protection, thus increasing the possibility of contagion," Italy's SPI-Cgil union warned.

The true picture of what is happening inside these elderly care homes is also clouded by a widespread lack of coronavirus testing kits.

Speaking to AFP, the French health ministry confirmed that due to the limited number of kits, only the "first three cases are tested in such collective facilities for vulnerable people".

Spain has just ordered hundreds of thousands of additional kits and on Monday said it would prioritise testing at residential care homes.

Video calls

Until now, the United Kingdom has taken a much more relaxed

approach to restrictions than its European neighbours, urging care homes to keep visits "to a minimum" while also stressing the importance of considering "the wellbeing of residents, and the [positive impact](#) of seeing friends and family".

To ensure the residents are able to keep in touch with loved ones, care home staff often find themselves scrambling to help out with technology.

At the Ballesol Altorreal nursing home in Murcia on Spain's southeastern coast, careworkers in masks and gloves use their phones to help elderly residents via Whatsapp video, Facetime or other similar technologies.

In footage released by the home, one of the elderly residents can be seen trying to reassure the person on the end of the line:

"What coronavirus?" she says. "Oh I don't have [coronavirus](#)."

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