News



A view of the empty Juventus stadium, as a measure against coronavirus contagion, prior to the Serie A soccer match between Juventus and Inter, in Turin, Italy, Sunday, March 8, 2020. Serie A played on Sunday despite calls from Italy’s sports minister and players’ association president to suspend the games in Italy’s top soccer division. (AP/LaPresse/Marco Alpozzi)

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Rome — March 9, 2020
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Italy took a page from China's playbook Sunday, attempting to lock down 16 million people — more than a quarter of its population — for nearly a month to halt the relentless march of the new coronavirus across Europe.

Weddings and museums, movie theaters and shopping malls are all affected by the new restrictions, which focus on a swath of northern Italy but are disrupting daily life around the country. Confusion reigned after the quarantine was announced, with residents and tourists from Venice to Milan trying to figure out how and when the new measures would take effect. Travelers crammed aboard standing-room-only trains, tucking their faces into scarves and sharing sanitizing gel.

After mass testing uncovered more than 7,300 infections, Italy's outbreak surged to nearly equal South Korea's, which had been tapering off, and trailing China, where COVID-19 is in retreat. Italy's death toll rose to 366.

Around the globe, more and more events were canceled or hidden behind closed doors, from the pope's Sunday service to a Formula One car race in Bahrain to a sumo competition in Japan, where wrestlers arrived at the arena in face masks and were required to use hand sanitizer before entering. In Saudi Arabia, all schools and universities were to close starting Monday, following similar moves in central China, Japan and other Gulf countries. Questions grew about whether to maintain U.S. presidential campaign rallies and other potential "super-spreading" gatherings of people, as the virus entered new U.S. states.

Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte signed a quarantine decree early Sunday for the country's prosperous north. Areas under lockdown include Milan, Italy's financial hub and the main city in Lombardy, and Venice, the main city in the neighboring Veneto region. The extraordinary measures will be in place until April 3.

Tourists in the region, including those from abroad, were free to head home, the Italian transport ministry said, noting that airports and train stations remained open.

The pope, who has been ill, held his Sunday blessing by video instead of in person, even though he was not directly affected by the lockdown. He described feeling like he was "in a cage."

It's a feeling familiar in China, where the government locked down about 60 million people in central Hubei province in late January. Six weeks later, they are still effectively stuck.

The World Health Organization has said China's move helped the rest of the world prepare for the virus to arrive, and WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus tweeted his support Sunday for Italians and their "bold, courageous steps aimed at slowing the speed of the coronavirus."

China has suffered about three-fourths of the world's 110,000 coronavirus infections and most of its 3,800 deaths. New infections in China have leveled off, however, and most of those infected, in China and globally, have already recovered.

Infections increased in other epicenters — South Korea, Iran and especially Italy. And with a nose-dive in tourist traffic and major disruptions to supply chains worldwide, stocks struggled Sunday. Mideast indexes fell 4% to 10%.

Italy is closing all museums and archaeological sites, even those far from the lockdown zone. It suspended all weddings until April 3. The northern regions concerned by Sunday's decree are closing cinemas and ski slopes.

Eateries all around Italy are expected, somehow, to keep patrons a meter (3 feet) away from each other.



The Colosseum, that will be closed following the government's new prevention measures on public gatherings, is reflected in a puddle where a face mask was left, in Rome, Sunday, March 8, 2020. Italy announced a sweeping quarantine early Sunday for its northern regions, igniting travel chaos as it restricted the movements of a quarter of its population in a bid to halt the new coronavirus' relentless march across Europe. (AP/LaPresse/Alfredo Falcone)

The Vatican Museums are now closed, including the Sistine Chapel, in yet another blow to Italy's all-important tourism industry. Alitalia, the Italian airline that was already financially ailing before the virus, suspended all flights from Milan's Malpensa airport starting Monday.

Lombardy's governor, who is in quarantine himself, sought to calm the public, discouraging hoarding and insisting "we're not going to war."

Chaos erupted in the hours before Conte signed the decree, as word leaked about the planned quarantine.

In a reversal of the stereotypical north-south tensions in Italy, the governor of Puglia urged northerners to stay away and not bring virus infections down south.

"Get off at the first railway station. Don't take planes," Gov. Michele Emiliano said in his dramatic appeal. "Turn around in your cars, get off the pullman buses at the next stop."

By Sunday afternoon, residents of northern Italy remained confused.

Factory worker Luca Codazzi was set to come out of a two-week quarantine but instead was facing new limits on his freedom. And he said the decree was confusing. "In theory, the cordon should go down at midnight,'' Codazzi said. He still doesn't know whether his factory will be open Monday.

Governments across Europe tightened their rules. Bulgaria banned all indoor public events. France's president and Germany's governing parties held emergency security meetings as the number of cases in each country surpassed 1,000.

In waters around the world, the virus has left the cruise ship industry in disarray.

The Grand Princess cruise ship, where 21 people have tested positive for the virus, has idled for San Francisco for days but was to dock in Oakland on Monday. Americans will be sent to facilities around the country for testing and isolation, but it's not yet clear what will happen to international passengers. Canada planned to pick up more than 200 of its citizens.

The Grand Princess had a cluster of almost 20 infections during an earlier voyage that has led to one death.

Another cruise ship is in quarantine on the Nile River in Egypt with 45 confirmed virus cases. Two other ships with no confirmed cases were turned away this weekend from Malaysia and Malta amid virus fears.

Advice to the public continues to vary. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urged older adults and people with severe medical conditions to "stay home as much as possible" and avoid crowds. A federal official told The Associated Press that the White House had overruled health officials who wanted to recommend that elderly and sick Americans not fly on commercial airlines too. A spokesman for U.S. Vice President Mike Pence denied that.

The U.S. death toll from the virus climbed to 21, with all but three victims in Washington state. Infections exceed 500, including the first case in the nation's capital. Two members of Congress, Sen. Ted Cruz and congressman Paul Gosar, were self-quarantining after meeting a man who was infected. Cruz said he had brief contact with the man. Gosar said he had sustained contact and his office would be closed for week.

China on Monday reported 40 new cases over the past 24 hours, the lowest level since it began publishing nationwide figures on Jan 20, and 22 new fatalities. China now has now recorded 80,735 total cases, among which 19,016 remain in treatment and 58,600 have been released.

China has had 3,119 deaths from COVID-19, with Italy's 366 deaths the second worst in the world.

South Korea reported 69 more cases, raising its total to 7,382, slightly surpassing Italy's 7,375 as the second-worst outbreak.

North Korea, which hasn't reported a single case but has put thousands in quarantine and nearly closed its borders, flew dozens of diplomats and other foreigners out of the country Monday morning.

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