

Coronavirus

The rest of the world must learn from our mistakes, says repentant Italy

As a stunned nation watches its dead being removed by the army truckload, it has words of advice for the countries not far behind

Dispatch

By Nick Squires
IN ROME

REMINISCENT of a nation at war, it was an image that shocked Italy – a convoy of army trucks taking dozens of coffins away from a city so overwhelmed by coronavirus it could not cremate them fast enough.

The lorries rumbled through the empty streets of Bergamo, a city at the heart of Italy's devastating contagion. "I would never have imagined we would see a convoy of army trucks carrying coffins. These are terrible days, without precedent," Giuseppe Conte, the prime minister, said this week.

From a handful of cases just one month ago, Italy has the grim distinction of being the country with the deadliest coronavirus outbreak, as the authorities yesterday extended its month-long lockdown.

These have been heart-breaking, morale-sapping days, with the number of deaths in the country reaching a world record 10,779.

Yesterday, the country reported another 756 fatalities as officially registered cases increased by 5,217 to 97,689.

As the Italians pray for light at the end of a very long tunnel, a reckoning has already started – what did Italy do right, what did it do wrong and what can other countries learn?

One factor that put Italy at a disadvantage was that the virus was probably infecting the country well before it was officially detected in late February. Experts believe it may have

been in northern Italy as early as December, with doctors assuming it was regular influenza.

The seat of the outbreak was identified as being in 10 towns near Milan, and on Feb 22 this "red zone" was placed under quarantine. Even then, the government veered between alarm and complacency, giving mixed messages as people began dying.

Beppe Sala, the mayor of Milan, launched a campaign – *Milan Non Si Ferma* (Milan Doesn't Stop), reassuring people and saying that life should continue as normal.

He issued a mea culpa this week: "At the time, it seemed to capture the spirit of Milan. Even the scientists could not give us an unequivocal interpretation of the gravity of the situation. But if I made a mistake – well I'm here now, doing my bit every day."

On Feb 19, despite growing alarm, the authorities allowed 46,000 football fans to pour into the San Siro stadium in Milan to watch a Champions League match between Bergamo's team, Atalanta, and Valencia.

Angelo Borrelli, head of the Civil Protection Agency, said: "It was potentially a detonator, but we are only able to say that now because we have the benefit of hindsight."

Giorgio Gori, the mayor of Bergamo, said the game was "among the sad explanations" for the high infection rates.

On Feb 27, Luigi di Maio, Italy's foreign minister, told the international press in Rome that they were unfairly exaggerating the crisis. Holding up a map of Italy, he showed that the area under lockdown represented just 0.05 per cent of the country and the number of people affected was 0.089 per cent of the population.

He criticised "alarmism and false information" and appealed to tourists

and investors to keep coming to Italy. The authorities were walking a tightrope of wanting to protect public health while desperate not to harm tourism, investment, business and industry, at a time when economic growth was already woeful.

Attilio Fontana, the governor of Lombardy, seemed to be a lone voice, repeatedly urging the national government to impose stricter measures, but he was overruled.

News of this was leaked the day before, resulting in 20,000 people in the north fleeing south, back to ancestral towns and villages their elders left decades ago for jobs in the north. Many used trains – described by one expert as "biological bombs".

Doctors and nurses wept with exhaustion. Today some officials believe those cities should have been placed under an immediate, more draconian, lockdown. "Not imposing a red zone around Bergamo, as the mayor of the city was calling for, was an error," said Beppe Sala.

He pointed to another factor – 24 years of budget cuts in the health system had reduced the number of doctors and local clinics – people with

coronavirus were instead being treated in large hospitals.

"The hospitals have become centres of diffusion for the virus. When you have lost the capacity to make home visits, you expose yourself to these risks," he said.

The virus has taken a heavy toll on Italian doctors and nurses – nearly 50 doctors have died and more than 6,000 medical staff have been infected.

"Paradoxically, at a time when most of Italy is shut up at home, hospitals are the only places where thousands of people find themselves in close contact," Pierluigi Lopalco, a professor of hygiene at Pisa university, told *La Repubblica* newspaper.

A dozen Italian doctors recently wrote a joint letter, saying that health systems worldwide had to be switched from hospital-based care to home-based care in the battle against Covid-19.

In a letter to the *New England Journal of Medicine* on March 22, they said: "Western healthcare systems have been built around the concept of hospital-based care," but the Covid-19 pandemic requires home-based care.



The Italian military transports the coffins of Covid-19 victims from the church of San Giuseppe to the crematorium in Seriate, Italy. Below, the Pope delivers the Angelus prayer to an empty St Peter's Square in the Vatican City

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Keeping patients at home rather than sending them to hospital would help contain the pandemic, they said.

As the number of deaths and cases

soared, the government brought in even more stringent measures. But it was too little, too late.

When a delegation of experts from

the Chinese Red Cross came to Milan last week, they said Italy should have done more to stop the spread of the virus.

"Here in Milan, there isn't a very strict lockdown policy. Public transport is still working and people are still moving around," said Sun Shuopeng, the vice-president of the Chinese Red Cross.

"It is time to close economic activities and prohibit the movement of people. Everyone must stay at home, in quarantine."

His stark warning was underlined hours later, when Italy surpassed China as the country with the most people killed by the virus.

Since then, the Italian death toll has continued to climb, with experts saying it has not yet reached its peak.

There is a dispute, however, over the true scale of the Italian tragedy. Many, including Mr Borrelli, now believe the real number of infections may be up to 10 times the official figure.

With 600,000 infections or more, that would bring the fatality rate down to between 1 and 2 per cent – commensurate with countries like

China. But no one knows for sure. The only way to find out would be to conduct random testing, to get a clearer idea of what percentage of the population is infected. Italy only tests people who display symptoms. Guido Cozzi, a professor of macroeconomics at the University of St Gallen in Switzerland, said: "If you don't have the right data, you can't make the right decisions. There should have been more testing"

public health services. Vincenzo De Luca, the governor of Campania, the southern region that includes Naples, said: "There is a real chance of adding a tragedy of the south to the tragedy of the north."

The Italian authorities argue they were the first in Europe to confront the pandemic and that it posed agonising decisions for a Western democracy. "No one in Italy or Europe was prepared for all this," said Giulio Gallera, the regional official in charge of health for Lombardy.

Alberto Mantovani, a prominent immunologist in Milan, added: "In the last month we were hit by a tsunami!" However, Italy knows it made mistakes and is beginning to acknowledge them.

Other countries, including Britain, do not have the excuse of navigating uncharted waters. They have a duty not to repeat Italy's errors.

"We acted with determination and we were the first in Europe to do so," the prime minister, told parliament in Rome this week.

"History will judge us, but now is the time for action."

Germany plans 'immunity certificates' to help end lockdown

100,000 people at a time would be tested, with those who have overcome the virus able to return to work

Post-lockdown

By Daniel Wighton in Berlin and David Chazan in Paris

GERMAN researchers plan to introduce coronavirus "immunity certificates" to facilitate a proper transition into post-lockdown life, as the handling of the crisis by Angela Merkel, the chancellor, has led to a boost in the polls.

Antibody test results will indicate that participants have had the virus, have healed and are thereby ready to re-enter society and the workforce.

The researchers plan to test 100,000

members of the public at a time, issuing documentation to those who have overcome the virus.

The researchers will use the information to determine how to properly end the country's lockdown, including reopening schools and allowing mass gatherings.

The immunity certificates are part of a research project being carried out at the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research, in Braunschweig, which will conduct blood tests to look for antibodies produced against the novel coronavirus in the general public, reports *Der Spiegel* magazine.

"Those who are immune can then be given a vaccination certificate that would, for example, allow them to be exempt from any [lockdown-related] restrictions on their work," said Gerard Krause, the epidemiologist leading the project.

The test will give researchers a bet-

ter idea of how many people have contracted the virus, with indications in Germany and elsewhere that large proportions of the population may have contracted it without knowing.

The test is also an improvement on existing blood tests which would indicate a degree of immunity to coronaviruses, but not specifically to Covid-19.

Despite having the fifth highest number of infected cases anywhere in the world, Germany has one of the lowest death rates – which has been at least in part credited to the government's proactive testing regime.

A German military plane yesterday took patients from eastern France, one of the worst-hit areas in the country, to Germany. A small group of patients from eastern France and Lombardy, in

Leading chefs bring succour to hungry hospital staff

France

By David Chazan in Paris and James Dadock in Madrid

AN ARMY marches on its stomach, says a maxim attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte. Accordingly, French hospital staff, the front-line troops in what Emmanuel Macron, the president, calls the "war" on coronavirus, are being treated to free gourmet meals cooked by the chefs of about 260 restaurants.

Stéphane Méjanes, a food writer, launched the initiative with Guillaume Gomez, the president's chef, after restaurants were closed.

Tiptoque, a company that pioneered

France

home deliveries of dishes prepared by Michelin-starred chefs, transports thousands of meals daily to hard-pressed staff at French hospitals, many of which are overwhelmed with Covid-19 patients. Public hospitals stipulated that the meals had to be specially prepared to be eaten quickly, often while standing up.

Among those taking part is Dominic Quire, a chef from Newcastle whose restaurant, Pickles, in Nantes, western France, has won acclaim from Parisian food critics.

He and Jean-Yves Guéno, a Michelin-starred chef, have brought comfort to hundreds of staff at the main hospital in Nantes.

One baguette a day in Riviera village as rules begin to bite

France

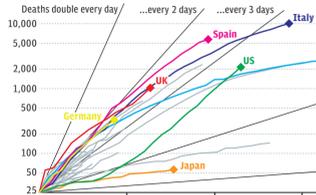
A mayor exasperated by breaches of lockdown rules has banned residents of a French Riviera village from venturing more than 10m (32ft) from their homes starting today.

National restrictions ordered by the government permit people to exercise within one kilometre (0.6 miles) of their homes, but Ferdinand Bernhard, mayor of Sanary-sur-Mer, has decided that they are too lax and has shrunk the radius.

Mr Bernhard has also banned the 5,000 residents of the Mediterranean village from buying more than one daily baguette.

certificates' to help end lockdown

Deaths by country Countries with at least 25 deaths
Data updated 29 March, 13:30 GMT



northern Italy, are already being treated in Germany.

The government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic has seen a surge

in public support for Mrs Merkel, who has experienced a boost in the polls since the outbreak started.

Yesterday, her approval ratings were

Spain

By James Dadock in Madrid

SPAIN saw a new record rise in the number of deaths from coronavirus as the country's government prepares to strengthen lockdown rules in a fresh bid to slow the rate of contagion.

According to figures released by Spain's health ministry just before midnight yesterday, 838 more people died as a result of the virus in the previous 24 hours, bringing the total death toll to 6,528.

Fernando Simón, the head of Spain's centre for health emergencies, said that a more positive outlook was pro-

vided by the rate of increase in the number of new cases, which was up 9 per cent on Saturday at 78,797, continuing a downward trend over recent days. He warned, however, that "the weekend could be causing a delayed effect."

Spain's cabinet sat on Sunday morning two weeks after declaring a state of emergency to approve a tightening of lockdown rules as announced by Pedro Sánchez, the prime minister, in a televised address on Saturday evening.

No one is now allowed to travel to work unless their job is in one of a limited number of key sectors including health and emergency services, food production and distribution, refuse collection and the postal service.

Israel

By James Rothwell in Jerusalem

ON ANY normal day, it would be packed with pilgrims and tourists traipsing around the tomb revered as the place of Jesus Christ's resurrection. But in the age of coronavirus, it greets visitors to Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre in stony silence.

A month ago, even as reports swirled of the extreme contagiousness of the disease, people were lining up to kiss the famous marble slab where the body of Jesus is said to have been laid.

Now, the Stone of Anointing has been disinfected and, before the

church was abruptly closed on Tuesday, visitors were being sternly urged to "avoid any act of devotion" that would contaminate it again.

"The church is open, but no one is coming," Wajeeh Nuseibeh, the custodian whose family has unlocked the church doors every morning since the seventh century, told *The Telegraph* shortly before the closure.

A similar story is unfolding across all major holy sites, as the spread of coronavirus hints at profound changes to worship that may linger long after the disease has been contained.

Bethlehem and Nazareth have also been transformed into ghost towns following an outbreak of Covid-19.

Iran's appeals for help could see jailed dual citizens freed

Iran

Talks held with Britain, France and Germany over the release of prisoners amid the coronavirus crisis

By Roland Oliphant
SENIOR FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

DIPLOMATIC appeals by Iran for relief from US sanctions to help it fight the coronavirus pandemic may offer an opportunity for the release of dual nationals jailed by the regime, campaigners have suggested.

Discussions between Iran and Britain, France and Germany over the coronavirus crisis have run in parallel with talks over the release of prisoners such as Nazam Zaghari-Ratcliffe, raising hopes of a general diplomatic breakthrough.

Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian charity worker who has been jailed since 2016, was told on Saturday that her furlough from prison would be extended by two weeks and has been shortlisted for clemency, raising hopes that she could possibly be on her way home.

"Obviously we are not an 'automatic' case, but one that needs a political decision, likely at the highest level, so it is good the prosecutor general and supreme leaders office are now formally involved in the decision on Nazam's case," said Richard Ratcliffe, her husband.

"The actual decision they take will depend, I suspect, on the wider diplomatic relationship between Iran and the UK, and particularly co-operation over helping to deal with coronavirus and the humanitarian crisis enveloping Iran, France and the US, if anything, had more success than the UK in the past few weeks with their prisoners – so I think there is movement far beyond just Nazam's case."

Earlier this month, Iran released Roland Marchal, a French researcher who was arrested in 2019 accused of plotting against national security.

Bill Richardson, a former US ambassador to the United Nations who is often involved in negotiations with hostile regimes, said at the weekend the Iranians were "contemplating" a request to allow Michael White, a UK prisoner who has come down with coronavirus symptoms, to come home.

Iran launched a diplomatic blitz to urge Western governments, including the UK, to violate unilateral US sanctions if necessary as the country's coronavirus epidemic exploded in early March. Personal protection gear like masks and aprons are not necessarily covered by the exceptions for medical equipment in US sanctions, making international banks and logistics companies wary of facilitating orders.

The economic impacts, including a dramatic erosion of many Iranians' personal savings under the sanctions regime, has also left the country vulnerable to the inevitable shocks associated with quarantine.

"The result is that Iran is facing ex-

treme trade offs between optimal public health results and steps to shore up the economy," said Ehsandiyar Batmangchi, founder of Bourse and Bazar, a think tank focused on Iran's economy.

Hassan Rouhani's government has been trying to get France, Britain and Germany to circumvent US sanctions since Donald Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, and US officials have accused Tehran of exploiting the pandemic for political gain.

"US sanctions exempt medicine and all humanitarian assistance. We have repeatedly offered medical assistance to the Iranian people, which the regime has rejected," Brian Hook, special representative for Iran and senior policy adviser to the US secretary of state, said in a comment to *The Telegraph*.

"The regime routinely blames America for problems of its own making and this crisis is no different. And does anyone really believe that this regime, which four months ago murdered 1,500 innocent Iranians, would spend sanctions relief on its own people and not on sectarian warfare? Let's not be naive here."

The appeal to lift sanctions has been

€5m

The value of a support package offered to Iran by the UK and its E3 partners France and Germany, the Foreign Office has said

undermined by mixed messages from Tehran, however.

Ah Khamenei, the supreme leader, on March 22 publicly rejected an American offer of medical aid, saying it was possibly a Trojan horse "to spread the virus more".

He also alleged, without offering any evidence, that the virus "is specifically built for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians which they have obtained through different means."

A spokesman for the Foreign Office said: "The UK – and our E3 partners France and Germany – recently offered Iran a comprehensive package of both material and financial support worth €5million (£4.5million) to combat the rapid spread of coronavirus."

Iran's ministry of health spokesman yesterday reported 123 new deaths in the previous 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 2,640 since it reported its first case in mid-February.

There were also 2,901 new confirmed cases, increasing the total number to 38,309, although the actual number has appeared to be far higher.

Mr Rouhani, the Iranian president, has faced mounting criticism for failing to impose the quarantine measures already adopted in east Asia and Europe.

He finally declared a lockdown with non-essential shops closed and a ban on non-essential intercity travel last week, days after scientists at Tehran's Sharif University of Technology released computer modelling that predicted as many as 3.5million people could die if Iran failed to observe strict social distancing and other preventive measures.



Remote arrest A Nepalese police officer uses a long grabbing tool to detain a man defying the lockdown imposed by the government amid concerns about the spread of coronavirus, in Kathmandu, Nepal.

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