

World

Italy Risks Losing Grip in South With Fear of Looting, Riots

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- ▶ Poorer regions are feeling strain of shuttered economy
 - ▶ Sicily mayor warns economic distress could stir up violence
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As Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte fights to hold Italian society together through a crippling nationwide lockdown, the depressed south is turning into a powder keg.

Police have been deployed on the streets of Sicily's capital, Palermo, amid reports gangs are using social media to plot attacks on stores. A bankrupt ferry company halted service to the island, including vital supplies of food and medicines. As the state creaks under the strain of the coronavirus pandemic, officials worry the mafia may be preparing to step in.

Preventing unrest in the so-called Mezzogiorno, the underdeveloped southern region that's long lagged behind the wealthy north, has become the government's top priority, according to Italian officials who asked not to be named discussing the administration's strategy.

With the European Union's most dangerously indebted state already fighting the Germans over the terms of the financial aid it needs, the fallout may reach far beyond Rome if Conte fails.

"We need to act fast, more than fast," Palermo Mayor Leoluca Orlando told daily La Stampa. "Distress could turn into violence."

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As the lockdown enters its fourth week, Health Minister Roberto Speranza said in a statement late Monday that the government will follow the recommendation of its scientific advisers to extend the lockdown from the current deadline of April 3 until Easter at least. Conte is also working on a new stimulus package for mid-April worth at least 30 billion euros (\$33 billion), following initial measures worth 25 billion euros, the officials said.

Italy has the highest death toll from the virus, with more than 11,000 fatalities, and almost 102,000 confirmed cases, second only to the U.S. It reported the smallest number of new coronavirus infections in almost two weeks on Monday.

[Read More: Italy Reports Fewest New Coronavirus Cases in Almost 2 Weeks](#)

Calls for Help

Within the aid he's already announced, Conte is trying to channel funds toward the South. Over the weekend he advanced 4.3 billion euros from a solidarity fund for municipalities and added 400 million euros to mayors that can be converted into coupons for groceries. "No one will be left behind," the premier said in a televised address.

Still, southern leaders are clamoring for more. They say that cash from the solidarity fund was already due to them and the economic damage from the lockdown has brought their region to the verge of a breakdown.

That opens another front for Conte, who is already struggling to stop the Italian health system from collapsing and fighting the European Union for joint debt issuance to help relieve the financial pressure on his government. Italy's economic output is set to shrink by 6.5% in 2020, according to research group Prometeia.

The lockdown has hit the 3.7 million Italians working in the underground economy particularly hard since they don't receive a regular salary and have difficulty accessing unemployment benefits. Many of them are concentrated in the South.

Submerged

Italy's informal economy is worth EU211 billion and employs 3.7 million people



Source: Istat report on unobserved economy in 2017, published Oct. 15, 2019

In the South, “many people live day-to-day, doing odd jobs, like unloading trucks at markets, and they are in trouble,” Stefano Paoloni, a police union leader, said by phone. “We need to be on the alert to see whether there’s organized crime behind social unrest.”

Criminal Gangs

Police have been stationed outside supermarkets in Palermo after at least one group of angry residents refused to pay for their purchases. The private Facebook group National Revolution, which has about 2,600 members, is urging others to stage such raids, according to newspaper la Repubblica. Other social media outlets, including WhatsApp chats, are being monitored, the newspaper said.

Adding to the sense of things breaking down, ferry company Tirrenia CIN on Monday decided to halt all its connections with Sicily, Sardinia and other minor islands because of financial difficulties. The government said in a statement it will ensure that vital goods are delivered.

Giuseppe Provenzano, who is in charge of the south in Conte's cabinet, said an emergency handout should also be given to those in the illegal economy. The risk is that organized crime gangs will step in to provide assistance to those in need, filling the gap left by the state.

The government needs to move "without hesitation," said Graziano Delrio, leader of lower-house lawmakers from the Democratic Party, the second-biggest group in Conte's coalition. Rome needs "to do whatever's necessary for the essential needs of families," he said in an interview.

– *With assistance by Alessandro Speciale, and Alberto Brambilla*

(Updates with health minister's comment on extending lockdown in sixth paragraph.)

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