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Record daily coronavirus death tolls in Italy and Spain since September

The coronavirus is continuing to spiral out of control in Italy, which is now experiencing the largest number of deaths of any country in Europe. On Tuesday, another 731 people died, and on Wednesday, 753 people, the highest tolls since the peak of the first wave from March 21–31.

The total number of COVID-19 deaths in the country, according to the official underestimated figures, is now 47,217, second only to the UK in Europe. More than 1.2 million cases have been detected. The number of daily new cases hit a record of 40,896 last Friday and has continued to average more than 30,000 in the days since.

On Tuesday, Spain also recorded its largest daily death toll since September, with 435 people killed. Spain surpassed one million cases on October 21, and in the space of just 20 days, the case total increased by 50 percent, to more than 1.5 million.



Coffins with the bodies of victims of coronavirus are stored waiting for burial or cremation at the Collserola morgue in Barcelona. (Image Credit: AP/Emilio Morenatti)

According to the official death count, there have now been 41,668 deaths in Spain. But this is a significant underestimate of the real toll. A report published Tuesday by *El Diario* detailed the increase in the national mortality rate associated with the two waves of the pandemic. Since 1975, there had never been more than 12,000 deaths in the country recorded in a single

week. For three consecutive weeks from March 23 to April 12, the weekly death rate exceeded 18,000.

From March to April alone, there were 43,000 more deaths than the historical average. Since September, the total number of excess deaths has exceeded 15,000, giving a total estimated COVID-19 death toll of more than 58,000.

In Italy, the healthcare system is already on the verge of collapse. Across the country, 42 percent of ICU patients are being treated for coronavirus, significantly above the emergency threshold of 30 percent indicated by the government as the point at which hospitals would be overwhelmed.

Ambulances are queueing up due to a lack of available beds. A video widely shared on social media posted by a health worker at the San Giovanni Rotondo hospital in the province of Foggia, in southern Italy, shows more than six ambulances queued waiting to be able to deliver their patients. "This is total chaos," the health worker says into the video.

While in March and April the pandemic had been largely confined to the northern regions around Lombardy, the virus is now overwhelming hospitals in the poorer south.

On November 11, a video taken inside the bathroom at Cardarelli Hospital in Naples went viral. A man is seen lying under the bathroom sink of the hospital ward, as the phone operator states, "This man is dead." Pointing at another motionless patient lying on a bed, they add, "This one we don't know whether he is alive or dead."

Last Friday, Rodolfo Punzi, the head of the infectious disease department at Cotugno hospital in Naples, told AP, "The current situation at the Cotugno hospital is that we have no more beds available." Nurses were seen providing oxygen treatment to patients in their cars outside the hospital a week ago. The army has converted the Formula One racetrack in Monza into a temporary hospital.

On Monday, the Italian government announced that it had requested Gino Strada, who founded Emergency NGO, which works with civilian victims of war, to manage the response to the pandemic in Calabria. Strada, who is also a surgeon, has previously worked setting up hospitals in Sudan and Afghanistan.

The health commissioner in Calabria, Saverio Cotticelli, resigned from the position on November 7, after admitting that it had no emergency coronavirus response plan.

Calabria is the poorest region in Italy, and has the highest rate of unemployment at 21 percent, and more than 30 percent among youth—double the national average.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has rejected repeated appeals by medical associations for a nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus.

On Monday, Massimo Galli, the head of the infectious disease department at Milan's Sacco Hospital, told RAI television, "I am afraid there is no doubt that the situation is largely out of control. Other illnesses don't go on strike because Covid exists and we have to get organized... otherwise the pandemic will end up doing damage that goes beyond the already very sad number of deaths." He said a total lockdown throughout the country was required.

The same day, Filippo Anelli, the president of the Italian Federation of Medical Guilds, had called for Italy to be put in a "complete lockdown."

The situation is "dramatic and therefore we must resort immediately to a total closure," he wrote. "We have reached fairly critical levels, lines of ambulances at emergency rooms are seen everywhere, intensive care is starting to have significant numbers."

Anelli told Ansa, "Either we stop the virus, or it will stop us, because the signs show that the system is not holding up. Even the current yellow regions will soon find themselves in the same conditions as the worst-hit areas."

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte rejected these appeals on Wednesday, November 11, telling *La Stampa* that "a generalised lockdown shouldn't be the first choice—the costs would be too high."

For the Italian and European ruling class, the “costs” of a lockdown—i.e., the potential impact on the profits of businesses—take absolute and unconditional priority over the tens of thousands of lives that could be saved by a lockdown to prevent the further spread of the virus. The current resurgence taking place across the continent was not inevitable. It is the outcome of the policies pursued by governments in Italy and across Europe.

They have rejected new lockdowns and deliberately reopened economies, pushing millions of workers back to work, ensuring that the virus could spread.

In Italy, as across Europe and the US, the Conte government has kept all primary school students in classes, to ensure that their parents can continue to go to work, while non-essential industries remain open, except for restaurants, bars and some smaller stores in certain regions.

In addition to the massive loss of life, the pandemic has wrought enormous social devastation, exacerbating the existing social crisis. While hundreds of billions have been pledged to prop up Italian corporations, the Conte government has refused to provide basic assistance for workers affected by the impact of the lockdown.

Valeria Leonardi, from SOS Ballarò, a neighborhood committee in Palermo, told the *Financial Times* on Tuesday that the lockdown from March to April “was a catastrophe for many people, who were already in a precarious situation, often forced to work without a regular contract and out of the institutional safety net, who found themselves without income overnight.”

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