Over 620 deaths in Italy on Friday as coronavirus fatalities surge in Europe

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Italy, Spain, Belgium and the UK all recorded their largest single-day death tolls in the global coronavirus pandemic on Friday. In Italy, which now has the highest number of deaths in the world, a further 627 people perished, taking the total to 4,032 fatalities. Another 5,986 new infections were announced in the locked-down country. Some 47,021 people have been infected so far, with 2,655 classified as in "serious, critical" condition.

On Thursday, the number of deaths at that stage in Italy (3,405) first topped the total coronavirus fatalities recorded in China.

In Spain, the total death toll rose to 1,002 yesterday. This gruesome milestone was reached as 235 died over the previous 24 hours. Almost 20,000 cases (19,980) have been recorded in Spain, with more than a third in the capital, Madrid. Army specialists are to begin entering care homes to help with disinfection. The virus has claimed more than 50 lives at elderly care facilities across the Madrid region.

In Belgium, 16 more people died, bringing the total to 37, with more than 2,000 cases of infection.

With the virus largely contained in China as a result of a mass lockdown and testing program, Europe is the new epicentre. As of Friday evening, 6,057 had died in 40 European countries. Russia, Ukraine and Belarus reported 1,044 new deaths. A total of 129,216 people have been infected across the continent, with 17,852 new infections yesterday.

The terrible impact of COVID-19 was graphically seen in a five minute video report posted Friday by *Sky News*, whose journalists were the first allowed to film inside the main hospital in Bergamo, northern Italy, where the number of dead has surged faster than the corpses can be buried or cremated by public authorities and churches.

The film includes harrowing scenes of close-to-death patients struggling for life in a crowded hospital with the few staff available doing everything possible to save them. A shocked reporter narrates, "They are fighting a war here and they are losing. The sheer numbers of people succumbing to the coronavirus is overwhelming every hospital in northern Italy.

"The staff are working flat out trying to keep their patients from deteriorating further. They are trying to stop them from dying."

Patients are shown wearing "plastic bubbles that fit over the heads of the most ill, staff struggle to communicate with patients. The bubbles are attempting to equalise the air pressure in the lungs."

The reporter comments, "It looks like an intensive care unit (ICU), but it is actually just an emergency arrivals ward. The ICU is full."

The only way that new patients can "qualify" for treatment on the ward is to be "actually on the point of death, not just gravely ill. In this pandemic, gravely ill is considered a reasonable position. It really is that bad."

Such images attest to the failure of an entire system of capitalism.

In France, a further 78 people died, bringing the total to 450. Coronavirus infections are doubling every four days, the French health directorate reports. On Friday, 1,617 new cases were recorded, for a total of 12,612.

In Germany, 15 died, bringing the number of fatalities to 59. New cases were recorded at 4,391, raising the total to 19,711. In the Netherlands, where 30 people died, total deaths are now at 106. There were 534 new cases, bringing the total to 2,994.

In the UK, deaths rose by 40 to 177—the largest rise in a single day since the outbreak. The infection toll now stands at almost 4,000, with 714 new infections

reported.

With 18 of the new deaths recorded in London, the capital is the epicentre of the pandemic in the UK. Hospitals are unable to cope with the huge rise in cases. London's Northwick Park hospital declared a "critical incident" yesterday after running out of critical care beds.

The *Guardian* reported that it had seen unpublished figures showing that the "number of people confirmed or suspected to have Covid-19 being treated in an intensive care unit in hospitals in south London rose from seven on Friday 6 March to 93 on Tuesday 17 March—a fifteenfold increase in 12 days."

Due to the escalation of the crisis in Britain, in the space of a few days Boris Johnson's Conservative government has gone from doing virtually nothing over the pandemic—as it advocated a policy of letting the entire population be infected to supposedly acquire "herd immunity"—to imposing firstly social distancing measures and yesterday ordering closed all cafes, bars, pubs, restaurants, nightclubs, theatres, gyms, cinemas and leisure centres.

Under conditions in which hundreds of thousands of workers have already been laid off or had their hours slashed and pay cut, many by up to 50 percent, the ruling elite fears a massive social and political backlash. Up to a quarter of the UK workforce—around 10 million workers—are employed in retail and sectors that have seen a collapse in trade.

Yesterday, the Arcadia retail chain, owned by billionaire Sir Philip Green, which has 1,000 employees, announced the closure of every store in the UK. Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary said that his entire workforce would have to take a 50 percent wage cut as the airline—with cash and other reserves of over €4 billion—prepared to ground most of its fleet and reduce capacity by 80 percent in April and May. Every other airline continent-wide is imposing similar measures.

In response on Friday, Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced measures "unprecedented in the history of the British state" centred on rolling out a "Job Retention Scheme," whereby all employers retaining staff would be able to claim 80 percent of their wages from the government up to £2,500 a month. The move follows that of the Danish government, which rolled out a similar scheme to cover 75 percent of workers' wages in the private sector.

The total number of Covid-19 infections in Europe is undoubtably far larger than any of the reported figures, due to the fact that virtually no testing is being done on a systematic scale in any European country. According to estimates from leading UK scientists, up to 180,000 people in Britain alone may already be infected with Covid-19, based on estimates that there are 1,000 cases for every one death.

Without extensive quarantining and rigorous testing, all global experience demonstrates that the virus cannot be combated.

This is proven by several studies conducted during the pandemic. This week, it was reported that due to the testing and retesting of all 3,300 inhabitants of the small town of Vò, near Venice, *all* new infections in the town were halted. Vò was the location of the first coronavirus death in Italy on February 22.

The *Financial Times* reported that the testing of all residents, "regardless of whether they were exhibiting symptoms, and rigorous quarantining of their contacts once infection was confirmed," meant "health authorities have been able to completely stop the spread of the illness there."

The first testing round, carried out in late February, found 3 percent of the population infected, though half of the carriers had no symptoms. After they were isolated, a second testing round 10 days later showed the infection rate had dropped to 0.3 percent. This second round identified at least six individuals who had the virus but showed no symptoms, meaning they could be quarantined.

This has major implications and lessons for every country. Professor Andrea Crisanti, an infections expert at Imperial College London, who is taking part in the Vò study, contrasted this approach to Britain's, where just 66,976 people have been tested nationwide out of a population of 66 million. "In the UK, there are a whole lot of infections that are completely ignored… We were able to contain the outbreak here because we identified and eliminated the 'submerged' infections and isolated them. That is what makes the difference."