

Italy

Police out in force

'Protests' greet launch of COVID-19 pass rule

ROME, Oct 16, (AP) — Protests erupted in Italy on Friday as one of the most stringent anti-coronavirus measures in Europe went into effect, requiring all workers, from magistrates to maids, to show a health pass to get into their place of employment.

Police were out in force, some schools ended classes early and embassies issued warnings of possible violence amid concerns that the anti-vaccination demonstrations could turn violent, as they did in Rome last weekend.

But by day's end, the protests appeared to have been largely peaceful, including one at Rome's central Circus Maximus where some protesters gave police officers flowers in a sign they meant no harm.

"We are not here to make violence or anything like that, we are here because they are taking away our rights and we can't even go to work anymore," complained protester Elena Campisi.

The so-called "Green Pass" shows proof of vaccination, a recent negative test or of having recovered from COVID-19 in the past six months. Italy already required them to access all sorts of indoor environments, including restaurants, museums, theaters, and long-distance trains.

But the addition of the workplace requirement has sparked heated debate and opposition in a country that was a coronavirus epicenter early in the pandemic, but has kept the latest resurgence in check through continued mask mandates and one of the highest vaccination rates in Europe.

"Today they are stepping on our Constitution," said an anti-vaccine protester, Loris Mazzarato. "I say NO to this discrimination."

He was among the hundreds of demonstrators in Trieste, where protests by port workers had threatened to impact commercial activities. Protesters shouted "Libertà" (Freedom) in a largely peaceful demonstration in Florence.

Burden

The new rule in a country that imposed the first COVID-19 lockdown and production shutdown in the West imposes a burden on worker and employer alike. Electronic scanners that can read cellphone QR codes with the Green Pass were set up at bigger places of employment, such as the office of Italian Premier **Mario Draghi** and the headquarters of state railway company Trenitalia.

But at smaller places of work, from restaurants to tennis clubs, employers and managers had to download an app that can scan the codes. While it was unclear how strictly Italy would enforce the requirement, the fear of spot checks drove employers to comply, at least initially.

Sanctions for employers who fail to check employees range from 400 to 1,000 euros. A worker who fails to show a Green Pass at work is considered absent without justification; if the worker shows up anyway without a valid Green Pass, he or she could face fines from 600 euros to 1,500 euros.

But there were some seeming anomalies: Supermarket cashiers and hairdressers have to have a "Green Pass" to work, but their clients don't need one to shop or get a haircut.

The aim of the requirement is to encourage even higher vaccination rates beyond the current 81% of the population over age 12 who are fully inoculated. And if recent days were any indication, it was working: The number of first shots administered Thursday shot up 34% compared to the beginning of the week, Italy's virus czar reported Friday.

But for those people who can't or won't get their shots, the expanded pass requirement imposes a burden of getting tested every 48 hours just to be able to go to work. People with a proven medical condition that prevents them being vaccinated are exempt.

Some employers are offering free tests at work, but the government has refused calls to make testing free across the board. Currently rapid tests run from 8 euros for children to 15 euros for adults.

Testing capacity proved to be Italy's Achilles' heel during the first wave of the pandemic, and the governor of the Veneto region, Luca Zaia, has warned it won't be able to keep up with the new demand. He has called for the government to let people secure passes based on results from at-home test kits rather than having to go to a pharmacy for a rapid test.

"If the law says people have the right to work with a test every 48 hours, they have to guarantee this right," Zaia said.

Requirement

For some opponents, the requirement is disproportionate to the current need: Italy has kept the latest delta variant-fueled resurgence largely under control through continued mask adherence social distancing norms, reporting around 67 cases per 100,000 inhabitants over the past two weeks and a daily official death toll that hasn't exceeded 70 for months. But proponents say the requirement will keep workplaces safe and allow Italy's economy, which shrank 8.9% last year, to further rebound.

The new rule is not a vaccine mandate, since a negative test or proof of being cured of COVID-19 are other ways to get it. In Italy, only health care workers are required to be vaccinated, and teachers and school administrators have had to have a "Green Pass" to work since Sept. 1.

But the requirement for all categories of workers went beyond other European countries. France has had a "virus pass" since the summer to access indoor activities and events, but it isn't required for all employees to get into work, just those who interact with the public. Full vaccination is required for health workers, retirement home workers and workers caring for the disabled, as well as psychologists, osteopaths, chiropractors and medical students. Fire officers and some soldiers are also obliged to be vaccinated.

In Greece, employers must maintain a record of the vaccination status of workplace staff. Workers must carry a vaccination certificate that can be scanned using a government application or pay for weekly testing.

In the U.S., the Biden administration imposed sweeping rules in September mandating all employers with more than 100 workers to require them to be vaccinated or test for the virus weekly, affecting about 80 million Americans. Another 17 million workers at health facilities that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid also have to be fully vaccinated, while vaccination is required for employees of the executive branch and contractors who do business with the federal government - with no option to test out.

Not even the Vatican was spared opposition to the new requirement: Three Swiss Guards quit and another three were suspended after they refused to get vaccinated before the Vatican's green pass requirement went into effect.



Draghi



Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio takes part in a march organized by Italy's main labor unions, in Rome's St. John Lateran square, Saturday, Oct. 16, 2021. The march was called a week after protesters, armed with sticks and metal bars, smashed their way into the headquarters of CGIL, a left-leaning union, and trashed its office, during a demonstration to protest a government rule requiring COVID-19 vaccines or negative tests for workers to enter their offices. (AP)

Britain

Death reopens questions about lawmakers security

Tributes paid to slain British lawmaker

LONDON, Oct 16, (AP) — Leaders from across the political spectrum came together Saturday to pay their respects to a long-serving British lawmaker who was stabbed to death in what police say was a terrorist-related attack. His death has reopened questions about the security of lawmakers as they go about their work.

The slaying Friday of the 69-year-old Conservative member of Parliament David Amess during a regular meeting with local voters has caused shock and anxiety across Britain's political spectrum, just five years after Labour Party lawmaker Jo Cox was murdered by a far-right extremist in her small-town constituency.

"He was killed doing a job that he loves, serving his own constituents as an elected democratic member and, of course, acts of this are absolutely wrong, and we cannot let that get in the way of our functioning democracy," British Home Secretary Priti Patel said after she joined others, including Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to pay tribute to Amess at the church where he died.

Patel said she has convened meetings with the Speaker of the House of Commons, police departments and UK security services "to make sure that all measures are being put in place for the security of MPs so that they can carry on with their duties as elected democratic members."

On Saturday, in an echo of the political unity that emerged after Cox's murder, Johnson of the Conservatives, the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Keir Starmer, and the non-partisan speaker, Lindsay Hoyle, arrived at the church where Amess died and laid flowers.

Amess was attacked around midday Friday during his constituency meeting in a church in Leigh-on-Sea, a town 40 miles (62 kilometers) east of London. He suffered multiple stab wounds. Paramedics tried without success to save him. Police have arrested a 25-year-old British man for the attack.

The Metropolitan Police has described the attack as terrorism and said its early investigation "revealed a potential motivation linked to Islamist extremism." It did not provide details

about the basis for that assessment. As part of the investigation, officers were searching two locations in the London area.

Amess, who leaves a wife and five children behind and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2015, died doing an important part of his job - helping out residents in his seaside constituency of Southend West, which incorporates Leigh-on-Sea.

Under Britain's parliamentary system, lawmakers have direct links with their local voters, often hosting open meetings, or "surgeries." The meetings often take place in local facilities such as churches and community halls, and are publicly advertised. Amess himself posted online where he would be hosting his surgery on Friday. It was open to all.

Reason

"The reason he wanted to use the church was because he wanted to be where the people were," said Rev. Clifford Newman at the Belfairs Methodist Church where Amess was killed.

"And if you come to somewhere which is in the locality like Belfairs, as opposed to some ivory tower somewhere, people are more likely to feel easier, freer and more likely to open up to him," he added.

At the meetings, topics raised can range from national matters such as the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic to more mundane issues such as requests for speed bumps on busy roads or a dispute over a neighbor's fence. While members of Parliament don't necessarily have the power to fix the problems directly, they can pressure officials at the national and local levels to get things done.

"I feel as if I have lost a family member. I feel that he was the family of Southend, he was the leader of Southend," resident Erica Keane, 69, said. "And he was everywhere! He was at the football pitches, he was in the choirs, he was in the pubs. He was everywhere and he was Southend."

Amess was clearly a popular lawmaker, winning 10 out of 10 elections since he was first sent to parliament in 1983. He was a social conservative on capital punishment and abortion.

ish third. The two coalitions have pledged to govern jointly. They're closer to the European Union mainstream than Euroskeptics Babis.

Together won 71 of the 200 seats in the lower house of parliament and the center-left alliance won 37 seats, which would give their government a comfortable, 108-seat majority. Babis' ANO won 72 seats, six fewer than it did in the 2017 election. (AP)



Conservative lawmaker David Amess outside the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, London on Sept 17, 2003. British police say a man has been arrested after a reported stabbing in eastern England. News outlets say the victim is Conservative lawmaker David Amess. The Essex Police force said officers were called to reports of a stabbing in Leigh-on-Sea just after noon Friday. It said "a man was arrested shortly after & we're not looking for anyone else." (AP)



Andrej



Merkel

Europe

Erdogan bids Merkel farewell: Angela Merkel's final visit to Turkey as German chancellor on Saturday saw two of Europe's longest serving leaders pay tribute to one another as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hosted her for farewell talks overlooking the Bosphorus.

Erdogan had been in office for more than two years when Merkel came to power in 2005. Since then, they have built a relationship based on pragmatism that has weathered several crises.

"I hope that our successful work with Mrs. Merkel will continue in the same way under the new government," Erdogan said at an Istanbul news conference.

The leaders discussed Turkey's relations with Germany and the European Union, as well as Syria, Libya and the eastern Mediterranean, where Ankara's interests have collided with Europe's.

However, Merkel has often adopted a conciliatory approach to Turkey, emphasizing the common interests of Turkey and the West. (AP)

4 Russian tourists dead: Police say four Russian tourists were found dead at a beach resort in western Albania.

Albanian police issued a statement Saturday saying the four were found asphyxiated in a hotel sauna in the village of Qerret late Friday.

Police did not give more details about the circumstances of the deaths, citing the ongoing investigation. They said the hotel's entire staff has been questioned.

The Russian tourists, aged 31 to 60 years old, were part of a group that had been staying for a week at the five-star resort 50 kilometers west of Albania's capital, Tirana. Investigators think the people who died might be members of the same family because of their surnames.

Tourism has turned into a major industry in Albania, a tiny Western Balkan country with 300 miles of coastline. (AP)

Babis heading for opposition: Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis said he wouldn't accept an offer to try to create a new government after his centrist ANO political movement narrowly lost in the parliamentary election last week and was ready to end up in opposition.

Babis announced his decision in an interview

for the Frekvence 1 radio station on Friday.

"We'll hand it over to the new coalition and we'll be in opposition," the populist billionaire said.

Babis' decision opens the way for two coalitions of five parties that have won a majority in the vote to rule.

A liberal-conservative, three-party coalition named Together captured 27.8% of the vote on Saturday, beating Babis' ANO (YES) party, which won 27.1%. A center-left liberal coalition received 15.6% to fin-



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, center, gestures to the media as he leaves after his meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at Huber Villa presidential palace, in Istanbul, Turkey, Saturday, Oct. 16, 2021. The leaders discussed Ankara's relationship with Germany and the European Union as well as regional issues including Syria and Afghanistan. (AP)

While never serving as a government minister, Amess was considered a fixer, a lawmaker able to forge alliances across the political divide.

Friday's killing has renewed concern about the risks politicians run as they go about their work representing voters. British politicians generally are not given police protection when they meet with their constituents - unlike the high-security measures that are in place in Parliament.

But the vitriol directed towards them has escalated in recent years, with many blaming the more polarized atmosphere on social media and the political divisions stoked by Britain's recent departure from the European Union.

"As members of Parliament, we want to be accessible and approachable, but recently there has been more and more violent abuse," Labour lawmaker Tanmanjeet Dhesi said.

Tobias Ellwood, a leading Conservative lawmaker who gave first aid to a police officer stabbed at the gates of Parliament in 2017, said face-to-face meetings with voters should be temporarily halted and replaced with online interactions.

Veteran Labour lawmaker Harriet Harman also said she planned to write to Johnson to ask him to back a non-partisan conference to review the safety of parliamentarians.

"I don't think anybody wants to go to a situation where the police are vetting individual constituents who come and see us, but I'm sure there is a safer way to go about our business," Harman told BBC radio.

"Since Jo Cox's tragic killing, we've had changes in our home security, we've had changes in security in Parliament, but we haven't looked at the issue of how we go about that important business in our constituency, but do it in a safe way," Harman said. "I think we must do that now."

Last year, in his own book "Ayes & Ears: A Survivor's Guide to Westminster," Amess wrote about how Cox had been murdered "in the most barbaric fashion imaginable" and how security issues could spoil "the great British tradition" of voters' easy access to their elected leaders.

He warned that "it could happen to any of us."

Russia pushes US destroyer: Russia's Defense Ministry said a Russian warship on Friday prevented a U.S. Navy destroyer from what it described as an attempt to intrude into Russia's territorial waters in the Sea of Japan.

The incident came as Russia and China conducted joint naval drills in the area, and follows other dangerously close encounters involving Russian and Western warships. It appears to reflect Moscow's intention to raise the stakes in deterring the U.S. and its allies from sending their ships on missions near Russian waters, as relations between Russia and the West are at a post Cold War low.

There was no immediate response from Washington.

The ministry said that the Russian navy's Admiral Tributs destroyer closely approached the U.S. destroyer USS Chafee to chase it out of the area near Russian waters that was declared off limits to shipping due to the gunnery drills there as part of the Russia-China maneuvers.

It said the Russian vessel came close to the U.S. warship after it had ignored repeated warnings to leave the area in the Peter the Great Gulf. The ministry charged that after making "an attempt to cross the Russian sea border," the U.S. warship changed course when the two ships were just 60 meters (66 yards) away from each other and sped away.

It denounced the U.S. destroyer's maneuvers as a "crude violation" of the international rules on averting ships' collision and a 1972 agreement between Moscow and Washington on preventing air and naval incidents and summoned the U.S. military attaché to protest what it described as its crew's "unprofessional action." (AP)