

International

Fears of 'chaos': Italy adopts tough COVID-19 pass regime

All workers required to show coronavirus health pass

ROME: Italy from Friday will require all workers to show a coronavirus health pass, one of the world's toughest anti-COVID regimes that has already sparked riots and which many fear will cause "chaos". More than 85 percent of Italians over the age of 12 have received at least one shot of a COVID-19 vaccine, making them eligible for the so-called Green Pass certificate.



Fines ranges from 600 to 1,500 euros

But according to various estimates, about 2.5 million workers, out of 23 million in total, are unvaccinated, and risk being denied access to the workplace from October 15. "You have no idea of the chaos that we will have in firms," the president of the heavily industrialized northern Veneto region, Luca Zaia, said recently. Unvaccinated workers can still get a Green Pass by getting tested for coronavirus or with a certificate of recovery, if they contracted the virus within the past six months.

But if they opt for tests, they have to take them at their own expense, and repeat them every 48 hours. Zaia suggested there was not enough testing capacity to meet potential demand, raising the prospect of mass absenteeism from work. "The entrepreneurs I talk to are very worried," he said. Green passes are already required for teachers and other school workers, and also for other activities such as eating indoors in bars and restaurants, or going to the cinema, museums and football games.

In eastern DR Congo, business battles with violence, uncertainty

BENI: Roger Muhindo is proud of his chocolate factory - an emblem of entrepreneurial courage in one of the world's most troubled regions. "We are pioneers!" Muhindo proclaims at the entrance to his plant, where 10 employees make a locally sourced product, Virunga Origins chocolate. Here in the troubled east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, threats from armed groups and lack of infrastructure are mighty, ever-present challenges to doing business. Rebels in the region have killed nearly 1,000 people over the past year. Barbed wire and armed guards patrolling the grounds are a reminder that the front line is not far away.

In June, the UN's expert group for DR Congo reported that on top of the attacks and kidnappings by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), government troops had harvested cacao pods in abandoned fields, hawking the beans illegally in neighboring Uganda. Despite the many problems, the Virunga National Park manages to keep the chocolate factory running. The famed wildlife park launched the plant in January 2020 in Mutwanga, in the violence-torn territory of Beni.

The goal is to process cocoa on the spot, creating value-added work in the Democratic Republic of Congo's agriculture-dependent economy. And by creating jobs,



BENI: Two workers at the Mutwanga hydroelectric plant look at the facility at the foot of the Rwenzori Mountains in Beni territory, northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. — AFP

Nigeria's 'tax' spat fuels fierce debate about federalism

LAGOS: A legal battle between Nigeria's government and states over sales tax is fueling fierce debate about federalism in Africa's most populous country as politicians jockey for position before 2023 elections. The spat-whether federal or state governments have the right to collect value-added tax (VAT) - may be about money, and the sum at stake runs into billions of dollars.

But the squabble also reflects long-standing questions about how Nigeria is governed and how wealth is shared in the continent's top oil producer. How the dispute ends may open up more state autonomy, analysts say, as wealthier southern regions test federal management of issues from oil resources and security policing

Avoid lockdowns

But they are not popular, at least among a sizeable minority of Italians - as shown by last Saturday's riots in Rome, where an anti-pass demo degenerated into an assault on a trade union building led by the neo-fascist Forza Nuova party. Anyone caught in the workplace without a Green Pass risks fines ranging from 600 to 1,500 euros, and those who fail to turn up for work because they don't have one face suspension on no pay - but cannot be fired.

Meanwhile, employers can be fined 400-1,000 euros for not checking if their staff comply with the rules. Prime Minister Mario Draghi opted for compulsory COVID passes last month in a bid to prevent further lockdowns and support Italy's recovery from a record 8.9-percent recession last year. The measure, which follows a similar initiative introduced in Greece last month, was also intended to boost vaccination rates.

Business lobby Confindustria has been among the staunchest backers of the Green Pass in Italy, one of the European countries hardest hit by coronavirus with more than 130,000 deaths. The focus is on "creating workplaces that are as safe as possible... because it is the only way to ensure public health and economic recovery," vice president Maurizio Stirpe told the Corriere della Sera newspaper. Trade unions, on the other hand, have been sceptical. They first called for a blanket rule forcing all Italians to get jabbed, arguing that option would have avoided discrimination between vaccinated and unvaccinated workers.

Threats from dock workers

But the government has stopped short of that, partly because one of the members of Draghi's left-right coalition government, the nationalist League party of Matteo Salvini, opposed compulsory vaccines. Once

the enterprise also hopes to provide an alternative to joining one of the region's many armed groups. "There are other people who would like to invest here, but they're afraid, with the war and everything that happens here," said Muhindo, the plant's production manager.

Last December, a few months after the first chocolate bars were marketed, Mutwanga and neighboring communities - until then relatively spared from violence - were hit by deadly attacks blamed on ADF rebels. In less than a year, more than 200 civilians have been killed within a 20-kilometre radius of the chocolate factory, mainly in isolated villages near cocoa plantations. Since 2019, the Islamic State group (IS) has claimed responsibility for some of the attacks by the ADF against civilians and Congolese army positions. IS presents the ADF as its branch in central Africa (Islamic State Central Africa Province, or ISCAP).

"We deploy small teams everywhere to protect those who are in their fields but it still makes the work so hard for us," said Antony Mwalushayi, Congolese army spokesman for Operation Sokola 1 - the fight against the ADF in the Beni territory. But among their ranks, according to the manager of an agricultural cooperative which supplies Virunga Origins, are soldiers who steal cocoa for resale to smugglers. They swoop in "as soon as the planters leave the fields," he confirmed to AFP on condition of anonymity. But the managers of Virunga National Park, a World Heritage site famous for its mountain gorillas, are not discouraged. After a period of reduced production at the chocolate factory, the machines have been running at full speed for a few months. "We are going to increase production capacity tenfold to meet local and international demand," said Bastien Allard, a park official.—AFP

to cattle grazing rights. In August, a court in southern Rivers State, Nigeria's petroleum heartland, ruled states should be responsible for collecting VAT and not the Federal Inland Revenue Service or FIRS. Rivers State Governor Ezenwo Nyesom Wike, a staunch opposition Peoples Democratic Party leader, pushed through a law authorizing local collection of VAT, warning FIRS against any "sabotage." Southern Lagos State, the nation's economic powerhouse including the commercial capital Lagos, quickly followed with its own law to collect VAT. After a federal government appeal, the dispute is caught up in competing demands, with Abuja considering a Supreme Court challenge. Attorney General Abubakar Malami last week told reporters that only the national assembly could legislate on how VAT is levied.

"The federal government is looking at all options at its disposal, including the possibility of involving the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court," he said. Under Nigeria's system, FIRS collects VAT centrally and the resources are distributed across federal, state and local governments. VAT receipts in 2020 were 1.5 tril-



ROME: Riot police surround protesters during clashes following a protest against the mandatory sanitary pass called 'green pass' in the aim to limit the spread of the COVID-19, in central Rome. — AFP

lion government ignored the union's advice, they successfully requested that unvaccinated workers should get fired, but only suspended. But they did not manage to also obtain free COVID tests for workers, paid by the state or employees.

"Personally, I will get tested," Stefano, one of the people who protested in Rome last week, told AFP. But he complained that it was "absurd" for him to have to

pay to continue doing his job. So far, only dock workers in Trieste have managed to win the privilege of free COVID tests, after threatening to block all activities in their port, a major hub in the northeast, from October 15. Meanwhile, there are concerns violence could break out again next Saturday, when the no-pass movement is planning further protests and unions are preparing for a big anti-fascist rally in Rome. — AFP

Cattle in the front line in troubled eastern Congo

BUNIA: Cattle farmers in eastern DR Congo prize their fine long-horned animals-sturdy beasts which once gave their region the nickname the "land of meat". But for many herders, every day brings its ration of fear for the safety of their animals from armed groups. Bosco Ndaura, secretary of an association of cattle farmers in Bunia, the main town in troubled Ituri province, said cattle rustling and killing were rampant. "We are not safe here," he said. "Since 2017, 7,000 to 8,000 head of cattle have been stolen." Ndaura was speaking at a ceremony by the Congolese army to return about 100 stolen cows to their rightful owners.

Such events are out of the ordinary-rustled cattle usually disappear for good, or end up being butchered by their thieves. The situation is so bad that many herders have moved north with their cattle into the neighboring province of Haut-Uele, where security is better. The loss is tragic, said Ndaura, who himself raises cattle. "In the 1980s, Bunia was called the 'land of meat'. Today, it's no longer the case-the animals which used to produce the meat are no longer there."

Troubled province

More than 120 armed groups plague the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, many of them a legacy of bloody regional wars a generation ago. Ituri and neighboring North Kivu are bearing the brunt of the violence. In May the government placed both under a "state of siege"-an emergency measure aimed at strengthening security, in which top civilian officials were replaced by senior army or police officers. Ituri itself has a long history of ethnic feuds, some of which are rooted in long-standing herder-farmer disputes over cattle.

Fighting between the Hema and Lendu communities between 1999 and 2003 claimed tens of thousands of lives, and was only quelled by the intervention of a European Union peacekeeping force, Artemis. The Hema are predominantly herders, while the Lendu are sedentary farmers-a rivalry that has a parallel with the Tutsi-Hutu divide which fuelled the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, although the scale of the bloodshed is not comparable.

After some years of calm, violence kicked off again in 2017, blamed on an armed group called the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO), which claims to defend the interests of the Lendu. CODECO, which has since divided into splinter factions, is today blamed for cattle rustling by Hema herders, who also single out two armed groups. They are the Patriotic and Integrationist Force of Congo (FPIC), which claims to represent the Bira ethnic group, and the Ituri Popular Resistance group (FRPI), once the militia of the Ngiti group in the Lendu community.—AFP

lion naira or \$3.6 billion. Under the current system the federal government gets 15 percent, with the rest split between states and local governments.

But richer southern states like Lagos and Rivers-Lagos alone produces around half of Nigeria's VAT-have long complained they end up paying for poorer states mostly in the agricultural north but also some southern ones. They want more "fiscal federalism," meaning getting a bigger share of the VAT they collect and more responsibility to manage their own affairs. "What we are after is to ensure that this money is used for the people of Lagos State, and that is exactly what we have achieved," Setonji David, a Lagos assembly lawmaker, told Channels TV.

The "restructuring" debate often resurfaces during election times in Nigeria, which became a single entity under British colonial rule in 1914 when the mainly Muslim north was joined with the mostly Christian south. Regional identities for Nigeria's major ethnic groups are often fiercely guarded-sometimes with separatist rhetoric-even as the federal government promotes national unity.—AFP

News in brief

Queen Elizabeth in rare outing

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II on Tuesday used a walking stick for the first time at a major public event, as she attended a church service at London's Westminster Abbey. The 95-year-old monarch stepped out of the car in which she was travelling with daughter Princess Anne holding a black stick-a rare sight for the record-breaking monarch. The last time she was photographed using a stick was after undergoing a knee operation in 2004. Her office did not give any reason why she was using the walking aid Tuesday. The Queen-Britain's longest-serving monarch-has generally enjoyed good health in her old age, and a brief hospital stay with a stomach bug in 2013 was her last known bout of illness. — AFP

Guinea strongman sacks 44

CONAKRY: Guinea's strongman Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, who seized power last month, has sacked 44 generals and admirals in an apparent purge of the military top brass. The authorities in the West African country announced late Tuesday that 42 generals and two admirals "are required to exercise their right to retirement." The reason for the decision was not given. Among the string of officers is General Sekouba Konate, who briefly ran a transition government before organizing elections in 2010. A former army chief of staff is also on the list, as is the senior commander of the gendarmerie, a police force that is under the control of the military. The forced retirements come less than a week after Doumbouya, 37, appointed Mohamed Beavogui as his interim prime minister. — AFP

Shooting at US post office

WASHINGTON: Two US Postal Service employees were shot dead Tuesday in a gun attack at a Tennessee post office, authorities said. The suspected shooter opened fire at the East Lamar Carrier Annex in Memphis and then died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. US Postal Inspector Susan Link told reporters that both victims, as well as the shooter, were postal service employees. "There is no ongoing threat," she said. "The FBI is working the scene and can confirm that the shooter is one of the three employees deceased by an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound," said Lisa-Anne Culp, a spokeswoman for the FBI's Memphis field office, at the same press conference. An investigation has been launched, she said. Both Link and Culp declined to give further details about the shooting. — AFP

California's Alisal Fire burns

LOS ANGELES: California firefighters scrambled overnight yesterday to battle a fast-moving blaze that has scorched more than 13,400 acres and prompted evacuation orders since it started Monday, according to local authorities. Burning in a dry, scrub-filled canyon about 20 miles northwest of Santa Barbara, the Alisal Fire is just five percent contained, according to the US Forest Service. More than 765 firefighters have been assigned to the blaze, the latest in what has already been a devastating wildfire season. "The main constraint has been heavy winds that have limited safe access to suppress the fire and limited the use of aircraft to engage and support fire suppression," an incident report said. The cause of the fire, which began near the Alisal Reservoir on Monday afternoon, remains under investigation, the state's fire agency Cal Fire said.— AFP