Rome hotels swap tourists for Covid patients

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The plush hotel lobby is normally bustling with business travellers and tourists, but now medics in protective gear welcome patients from hospitals struggling with Italy's surge in coronavirus cases.

The Sheraton Parco de'Medici is one of more than 15 hotels being used to house COVID-19 patients in Rome, providing a total of 800 beds—half of which are already occupied, according to the Lazio regional government.

"Medical beds have been lacking in the last few days, leading to a blockade of ambulances at the entrance of emergency rooms," said Dr. Simona Amato, the director of one of Rome's local health agencies.

The Sheraton, equipped with a swimming pool and located next to a golf course in the south of Rome, has made 169 rooms available for patients, with 49 of them also equipped for those who need oxygen.

It can house patients who are asymptomatic but need a place to isolate, patients in the process of recovery and those from the hospitals who are not in serious condition but still need treatment.

Italy, the first European country hit by coronavirus earlier this year, has recorded a surge in cases in recent weeks, with more than 30,000 infections and more than 600 deaths reported on Wednesday alone.

With health services under strain and many hotels standing empty due to the lack of tourists, Regional Affairs Minister Francesco Boccia says the government has arranged for 15,000 beds to be used for COVID-19 patients.

Not every region uses them but this week Boccia promised a further strengthening of the network "to relieve the pressure on emergency rooms and on family doctors".

Christian, a 23-year-old nurse, took up residence at the Sheraton after he began suffering mild symptoms. He lives with his parents, and was afraid of infecting them.

"We are visited twice a day, the medical staff is here 24 hours a day. The room has all the comforts and was equipped with an oxygen tank because during the first few days I had difficulty breathing," he said.

"The days are very long, I spend my time watching movies on the computer and studying."

Antonella De Gregorio, manager of the Urban Garden Hotel across town, has made available 50 rooms for asymptomatic coronavirus patients who need to isolate, just as she did when the outbreak first hit Italy.

Each room costs 30 euros per day, paid by the regional authorities. Medical assistance is on hand, although hotel staff do not come into contact with patients, instead focusing on administrative tasks.

"We offer a service and at the same time we are able to pay some expenses and save jobs," De Gregorio said.

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