

Migration issue opens rift in Italy's coalition amid COVID-19 crisis

ROME (Reuters) – Italy's coalition parties quarreled on Tuesday over a move to grant permits to irregular migrants working in farms and as carers, in a row that delayed the approval of a stimulus package for the coronavirus-hit economy.

The anti-establishment 5-Star Movement is against giving temporary work papers to migrants, saying it will benefit unscrupulous bosses. Its centrist and leftist allies, the Democratic Party (PD), Italia Viva, and LeU, support the measure.

The scheme is aimed at helping key sectors after the COVID-19 epidemic cut the flow of cheap labor from abroad. It also looks to protect workers by giving them easier access to healthcare should they catch the disease.

Migration is a politically sensitive issue in Italy where rightist parties, including Matteo Salvini's League, have surged in popularity because of their hardline policies aimed at preventing an influx of migrants from northern Africa.

The 5-Star governed with the League until last August and embraced Salvini's anti-migrant stance. It subsequently forged an alliance with the center-left but has appeared reluctant to adopt the more moderate approach of its new partners.

"The latest draft of the decree still includes an amnesty for those who admit to previous illegal employment practices ... We won't back down on this," said 5-Star leader Vito Crimi, adding this would help those who had exploited poor workers.

Farmers have said crops will rot in the ground unless they can attract more laborers.

Some 560,000 of the 6.2 million migrants living in Italy in 2019 did not have any work or residency papers, according to the Ismu Foundation, a think tank that specializes in migration issues.

RECESSION LOOMS

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's office said on Tuesday that ministers had reached a deal on the migrant permits on Sunday. However, it said 5-Star lawmakers had reservations about the accord and wanted more time to review it.

The delay infuriated the PD, with party senators issuing denouncing the 5-Star position as "absurd".

Last week, Agriculture Minister Teresa Bellanova, a member of former prime minister Matteo Renzi's small Italia Viva party, threatened to resign if the permit proposal was rejected.

COVID-19 has killed almost 31,000 people in Italy. The government imposed a shutdown on most businesses and the country could face its worst recession since World War Two.

The government has promised to approve a 55-billion-euro (\$59.82 billion) package to bolster the economy and wanted to include the new permit rules in the decree.

Editing by Timothy Heritage

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