

Italy forces refugees out of model refugee town



Rome, October 15 (RHC)-- Italy's Interior Ministry has ordered that all asylum-seekers be transferred out of the small southern town of Riace, which had gained international attention for its innovative model for refugee integration.

The ministry said over the weekend that "clear irregularities" in the town's immigration reception system had prompted the authorities to seek the transfer of refugees to other centers, beginning next week.

The "Riace model" -- funded since the 2000s with Italian and European funds -- posed a simple but effective way to integrate refugees to both revive depopulated villages and house hundreds of asylum seekers. Riace restored abandoned houses for refugees and reopened craft workshops, prompting tourists to flock to the town.

Domenico Lucano, the left-leaning mayor of Riace, who is currently under house arrest, made headlines around the world for welcoming asylum-seekers to the sparsely-populated town in a bid to boost jobs and development.

Authorities placed Lucano, who is known by locals by the name Mimmo under house arrest last month. A former teacher and an internationally-recognized human rights activist since 1998, Mimmo is accused of setting up fraudulent associations so that refugees can become trash disposal contractors, among other

charges.

His arrest was hailed by the anti-refugee Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini.

Since coming to power in June, Salvini's party has taken tough anti-refugee measures and reduced those projects inspired by Riace to shelter asylum-seekers in large centers.

The state gives small centers 35 Euros a day for each resident, with the bulk of the money being spent on providing accommodation, food and language lessons. A small amount of pocket money is also given to the refugees.

Mimmo's arrest sparked huge outcry among human rights advocates. Ordinary Italians also took to streets in the capital, Rome, to show support for the pro-refugee mayor. The demonstrators, who accused Italy's coalition government of attacking freedom, described Mimmo as a role model for world activists.

Riace has been lauded by many as a model of integration, and its mayor came second in the 2010 World Mayor competition. Mimmo was even named one of the 100 most influential personalities by Fortune magazine in 2016.

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