

# Exasperated Italy targets foreigners

Romanians are rounded up for deportation amid a crime wave -- a rare move against citizens of a fellow EU member state.

By Tracy Wilkinson, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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ROME — Alexandru Nekifor, a waiter, thinks it's advisable these days not to tell anyone he's Romanian. Laurentiu Apostol, a construction worker, has watched this last week as terrified friends packed up and fled Italy, headed back to Romania or to other lands.

A wave of violent crime blamed largely on foreigners, including the especially brutal killing of a naval commander's wife, has pushed the center-left Italian government into deportations that human rights activists say are unprecedented in European Union history.

The Italian government Nov. 2 enacted an emergency decree that allows local authorities to swiftly expel foreign nationals from EU countries if they are deemed a threat to public health or security. So far, about 30 people have been rounded up and ordered deported, all of them thought to be Romanians and many of Roma, or Gypsy, background.

Untold numbers have left on their own, afraid of the backlash. And right-wing opposition leaders are demanding up to 20,000 expulsions.

Last weekend, numerous cars and trucks with Romanian license plates could be seen, hauling campers piled high with belongings, headed north on Italy's A-1 motorway, which leads out of the country.

The decision to begin expulsions drew criticism from EU officials and human rights groups and fueled divisions within Prime Minister Romano Prodi's governing coalition.

Although Italy receives sympathy for the string of brutal crimes, critics warn that a specific nationality should not be blamed and targeted for collective punishment.

## **Fears of a witch hunt**

Recent arrests of Romanian suspects "must not lead to a witch hunt of Romanians," said Rene van der Linden, president of a key continental parliamentary body, the Council of Europe.

"The Italian government may well have the right to expel a number of persons on public safety grounds," he added, "but all decisions must be subject to judicial review and taken on an individual basis rather than collectively."

Italian officials insist that they are not singling out a nationality but resolving a law-and-order crisis.

Anti-immigrant sentiment has been on the rise in parts of Italy, a once-homogenous society that has seen a large influx of foreign-born workers in the last decade. Crime also has increased, authorities say, and often the alleged culprits are foreigners.

But the breaking point came late last month when Giovanna Reggiani, the 47-year-old wife of a naval commander, was accosted one evening in Rome as she left a Metro station. She was raped, beaten and left in a muddy ditch to die.

Reggiani languished in a coma for several days before succumbing. A Romany man originally from Romania was arrested and charged with murder.

The outcry was fierce, and the government acted quickly, approving the emergency decree and sending police and bulldozers into squalid camps where Gypsies and some non-Roma Romanians live. One of the first camps razed was home to the suspect in the Reggiani case.

On the night Reggiani died, a mob of masked men wielding clubs and knives stabbed and beat four Romanians outside a supermarket in Rome, leaving one in critical condition. The next day, Adrian Mutu, a Romanian native who plays for the Fiorentina soccer team, was called obscene and racist names at a game in Rome.

Interior Minister Giuliano Amato argued that the deportations were necessary to prevent such vigilantism.

"We must prevent this terrible tiger, which is xenophobic rage, the racist beast, from getting out of control," Amato told La Repubblica newspaper.

What is unusual about the crackdown is the expulsion by one EU member of nationals from another. Italy's previous use of "fast-track" expulsions, as they are known, targeted terrorism suspects who were sent primarily to North African and Middle Eastern countries. But targeting fellow Europeans is new, said Judith Sunderland, an Italian-based researcher with Human Rights Watch, which condemned Italy's action.

Although the decree requires a judge to sign off on each deportation order, no criminal investigation is required. The person is barred from reentry into Italy for three years, and faces prison if he or she returns during that time.