

ITALY'S POPULIST SURGE STALLED BY WEEK OF CAPITAL IN CHAOS

ROME: It was supposed to be the start of something big. When the Five Star Movement won the keys to Rome's City Hall in June, all the talk was of the anti-establishment movement founded by comic Beppe Grillo starting to look like Italy's government in waiting. Two months later the party is in crisis, its credibility on the line because the beleaguered new mayor, Virginia Raggi, has still not finalised a team to run the city she vowed to start cleaning up from day one.

Fed up with chaos and corruption in their public services, Romans swept Raggi into power to chants of "Onesta, Onesta" (Honesty, Honesty), Five Star's rallying cry. But the themes that dominated the election have come back to haunt the political novice who became the first female leader of the Eternal City. After a week of turmoil, Raggi, 37, now stands accused of being anything but honest. She has scored a string of political own goals and, despite hopes to the contrary, has failed to tame what many regard as an ungovernable city.

Her woes started last month when rubbish began to pile up on the streets

of Rome's neglected outlying suburbs, providing a smelly reminder of endemic problems at the city's corruption-tainted refuse collection agency AMA. Simultaneously, Raggi came under fire for putting a former AMA insider, Paola Muraro, in charge of cleaning up the agency.

'I'm not giving up'

Worse was to follow. Muraro, it quickly emerged, is under criminal investigation linked to her time as an AMA consultant and the mayor knew that. Raggi told a parliamentary hearing this week that she had informed her own party hierarchy but had not felt compelled to make the information public. Political opponents and much of the media smelt blood: was the squeaky clean party of transparency exposing itself as just like all the others?

Raggi maintains she did not deliberately mislead the public. "I'm not giving up," she vowed. But her handling of the issue has angered M5S activists and increased tensions between Raggi and Grillo. The pair are reportedly no longer

on speaking terms as the mayor resists the party founder's desire to keep her on a tight rein. Luigi Di Maio, the Grillo protegee seen as the movement's likely candidate for prime minister, has also been damaged, having been forced into an embarrassing confession that he had not grasped the severity of the allegations against Muraro. "I made a mistake," he told a rally of party faithful.

Hit in the polls

Raggi's cause was not helped by her decision to appoint a chief of staff on a reported salary of 193,000 euros, twice that of his predecessor. Despite the generous stipend, he resigned last week, along with the city finance chief and three senior staff at AMA and ATAC, the company that runs the city's much-maligned public transport. A replacement finance chief had not even started work before he too was forced to step aside because of his own legal problems.

Analysts say the fiasco in Rome is bound to damage the national standing of a party that had overtaken the ruling Democratic Party in the opinion

polls with around 30 percent of voters pledging to back them in national elections. "M5S has blundered every step of the way and it is paying the price for thinking practically anyone could run Rome: (Raggi's) three years' experience as a city councilor were never going to be enough," said Gianfranco Pasquino, a professor of political science at the John Hopkins School in Bologna.

"What has happened will have an effect on public opinion and some people who were planning to vote M5S could change their minds," Pasquino told AFP. Pollster Antonio Noto said the fiasco in Rome had affected the movement's national standing but that it was too early to say if a hit of around three percentage points would be long-lasting.

"For the first time since the movement was created, half its supporters are very critical of how this affair has been handled - that is something new," Noto, of IPR Marketing, told daily *Il Messaggero*. "But that does not necessarily mean voters will abandon them, they'll see how the situation develops." — AFP

4 DEAD AS TRAIN DERAILS IN SPAIN

FRONT COMPLETELY CAVED IN AND MANGLED

O PORRINO: At least four people died and around 50 were injured yesterday when a train came off the tracks in north-western Spain on its way to Portugal, just as it was approaching a station. The Portuguese driver was among the dead in the accident, which saw the train hit the wall of a bridge and smash into a pillar, according to the mayor of the nearby town of O Porrino. Pictures posted online and in local media showed one carriage of the train, which was carrying at least 65 people, lying on its side, the front completely caved in and mangled.

Helicopters, ambulances and fire engines rushed to the scene to attend to the victims, some of whom were thought to be seriously injured. A passenger said in a video posted on local daily *La Voz de Galicia* that the train suddenly started wobbling. "It wouldn't stop. I was sitting down and I fell to the ground," she said. "And then the train stopped. It was that quick." Ramon Gonzalez, a witness interviewed by Spanish television who works in the station cafeteria near the accident, said there was a "very strong bang." "It was full of black smoke ... It's a straight line, the train was due to stop in 50 metres (164 feet), so this isn't normal. "There are still some injured here but not very serious, the seriously injured were quickly evacuated."

'Very straight line'

The train was travelling from the Galician town of Vigo to the city of Porto in Portugal when the accident happened near O Porrino. Manuel Carrera, deputy mayor of O Porrino, said four people had died in the accident. Adif, the company



O PORRINO: Firefighters and rescuers inspect the wreckage of the train. — AFP

that manages railways in Spain and is in charge of the tracks, said the accident happened around 9.30am local time (0730 GMT) just before arriving into the station. "It's a very straight line," a spokeswoman said. "There isn't bad visibility there, it emerges from a curb," Eva Garcia de la Torre, Mayor of O Porrino, told the *Cadena Ser* radio. She added that the train looked old. But the reason of the derailment has yet to be determined.

Spain's railway company Renfe said the train and the driver were both Portuguese, adding that railway traffic had been suspended in the area. Galicia was also the scene of one of Spain's worst rail disasters in 2013, when around 80 people were killed and another 144 injured after a train slammed into a concrete wall on the outskirts of Santiago de

Compostela. The train was approaching a curve at more than twice the speed limit on that piece of the track in Galicia. A pre-trial investigation of the July 24, 2013 crash carried out by a court in Galicia concluded the accident was caused by a lapse in attention by the driver, who was on the telephone at the time of the crash with another rail employee.

He has been charged with negligent homicide, and a Spanish court said earlier this year that an investigation into the crash would be reopened to determine if Adif was also partly responsible. As regional elections near in Galicia at the end of the month, several political parties including the ruling conservative Popular Party and the Socialists announced they had suspended their campaign, which had only just kicked off. — AFP

SWEDEN TO BEGIN AGE CHECKS FOR REFUGEES

STOCKHOLM: Sweden will next year begin medical testing to determine the age of unaccompanied child refugees, officials said yesterday over fears adults are trying to pass themselves off as minors to up their chances of getting asylum. The National Board of Forensic Medicine told reporters it would begin age tests in early 2017. Forensic examiners will determine whether an asylum seeker is over or under the age of 18 based on dental assessments of wisdom teeth and magnetic imaging of the knee joint.

"There's no method to medically determine the exact age of an individual... but by studying which phase a person is in, you can draw approximate conclusions," forensic examiner Elias Palm said. The tests will be conducted when an asylum seeker claiming to be under the age of 18 is unable to prove his or her age, and the case handler is in doubt. The tests will be voluntary, meaning that an individual can refuse to undergo them.

A spokesman for the Migration Agency, Fredrik Bengtsson, told AFP that minors wanting to prove their real age would welcome the tests. Those who refuse run the risk of having case handlers determine that they are adults. Sweden has taken in more unaccompanied child asylum seekers than any other country in Europe. In 2015, the Scandinavian country took in more than 35,000 unaccompanied children, 90 percent of whom were boys and many of whom do not have identification papers.

Sweden has since tightened its asylum regulations, and this year the number has fallen to 1,700 as of the end of August. According to the Migration Agency, there are age doubts in 70 percent of cases where asylum seekers claim to be between the ages of 15 and 17. Swedish officials have also expressed concern that some adults passing themselves off as children are being placed in housing centres for children, putting the younger children at risk.

In one case that garnered nationwide attention, a 12-year-old boy from Afghanistan was raped by two other self-proclaimed "boys" living in the same housing centre for children. The perpetrators had claimed to be 15 years old on their arrival in Sweden, but were later determined to be adults. The National Board of Forensic Medicine, which will outsource the testing, said that there would likely be between 4,000 and 18,000 tests carried out overall. — AFP