

# Mamma mia: Italian birth rate tumbles

**Tom Kington Rome**

Italy's population shrank by 342,000 last year as Covid deterred people from having children while pushing up death rates, according to latest figures.

Just 404,000 births were registered, a record low for Italy since the country was founded in 1861, while deaths rose to 746,000, the highest registered since the Second World War, the state statistics agency **Istat** said.

"We have watched Italy's birth rate fall steadily since 2008 and Covid and its fallout now look set to accelerate the decline," Gian Carlo **Blangiardo**, the **Istat** president, said.

Births fell 16,000 from 2019, part of a long-term decline that experts link to economic woes, lack of childcare and emigration. But what shocked experts was the 8 per cent drop in births in November, nine months after the Covid pandemic first erupted in Italy.

Births then fell by 10 per cent year on year in December, nine months after Italy entered its lockdown.

While some experts forecast that

couples stuck at home would procreate more, the opposite happened. "I have been told that Italian Google searches for 'contraception' rose at the time while searches for 'pregnancy' dropped," **Blangiardo** said.

"It's the same as February 1987 when births dropped 10 per cent, nine months after the Chernobyl disaster, but in that case things soon returned to normal. Now I expect to see the drop continuing into 2021 as fear of the virus turns into fear of the economy."

Marriages last year were down 48 per cent on 2019 at 97,000. "Two thirds of Italian babies are born in wedlock so if people put off weddings, they put off children," **Blangiardo** said.

Italy's crisis will be debated at a conference next week at Luiss University and attended by Ryuichi Tanaka, an economics professor from the University of Tokyo, who said Covid had helped cut Japanese pregnancies by 5 per cent between January and October.

While births in Italy fell, deaths were up 112,000 year on year to 746,000, with

just 74,000 official Covid victims, suggesting the real figure was higher.

Roberto Bernabei, an expert on ageing at Gemelli hospital in Rome, predicted that Italy's population of 59 million would fall to 58 million by 2030 while the average age would shoot up.

"The forecasts are dramatic and ignored by politicians, who pretend the problem does not exist," he said. "We have five million people who are over 90, mostly women, half of whom suffer from dementia. From 20,000 centenarians we will have 100,000 by 2030."



Peso: 16%