

Prodi says Romanian influx took EU by surprise

By Guy Dinmore in Rome

Europe completely underestimated the scale of the exodus from Romania after the country's accession to the European Union this year, Romano Prodi, Italy's prime minister, has said.

"Nobody could expect that [scale of influx]. Nobody was expecting the outflow from Romania [across Europe]," he told the Financial Times in an interview.

The Italian government is battling a wave of public anger over uncontrolled immigration following the brutal murder last week of a 47-year-old woman outside a Rome train station. A Romanian man was subsequently arrested and charged with sexual assault, robbery and murder.

In response to the public outcry, the government issued a decree authorising local authorities to expel EU nationals deemed a threat to public safety.

Asked how many Romanians had entered Italy since Romania entered the EU on January 1, Mr Prodi replied: "Nobody knows." However, he said the figure of 500,000 people given by Giuliano Amato, the interior minister, was an "exaggeration".

The majority of Romanians are in Italy legally and are employed in construction, day care and night-shift work.

Mr Prodi defended the principle of free movement of EU citizens and said Italy desperately needed imported labour. But he said the directive governing the free movement of EU citizens, drawn up when he was president of the Commission, was inadequate.

As a staunch defender of EU enlargement while Commission president from 1999 to 2004, Mr Prodi insisted that the expansion of the bloc had been more positive than expected.

"I used to repeat that this [enlargement] is the only way of exporting democracy," he said.

Italy has expelled only a few EU citizens but nearly all of them are Romanians.

Roads still lead to Rome, Page 3

Prodi eager to take heat out of debate

FT INTERVIEW Romano Prodi

Italy's premier faces political pressures that clash with businesses' hunger for cheap labour, says Guy Dinmore

Less than a generation ago, reflects Romano Prodi, Italians were still leaving their homeland in search of work. Now, within the space of a few years, Italy has taken in 3m immigrants and, with a declining birth rate, needs still more to sustain its ageing population.

"Psychologically and socially, the speed and the impact is incredible," Italy's prime minister told the Financial Times, recalling that he was six years old when he saw his first foreigner and 18 before he had his first non-Italian classmate.

He recently visited northern Italy, where Sikhs now prevail in the dairy industry, to inaugurate a Sikh temple. "There were 4,000 people," he says, with approval. "I am convinced that this phenomenon of immigration is not temporary. The demography is so clear."

However, in the wake of the recent gruesome murder of Giovanna Reggiani, the wife of a naval officer – allegedly by a Romanian immigrant – Mr Prodi finds himself on the defensive. As opposition leaders demand mass expulsions and a closing of the doors to further immigration, business is lobbying the government to increase its quotas for for-



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Daniel Lynch

eign workers – set at 270,000 for the year.

Mr Prodi continues to welcome legal immigrants in search of work but Walter Veltroni, the mayor of Rome, and his designated successor as leader of the centre-left, has had to demonstrate his own hardline credentials knowing that the weak coalition government might collapse at any point, prompting snap elections.

All along the banks of the Tiber, which winds through Rome, police acting on Mr Veltroni's orders have cleared out immigrants and

their children living in shacks and boxes. Two drug addicts, injecting heroin, – both Italians – were all who remained yesterday among the debris of a suddenly abandoned meal.

"In the first seven months of the year, Romanians made up 75 per cent of the arrests of those who raped, stole, killed. We clearly have a specific problem," Mr Veltroni said.

Figures are argued over but it is agreed that Romanians make up the largest group of foreigners in Italy. Many work in industry,

construction or care for the elderly. Mr Prodi stresses their close cultural, linguistic and economic ties to Italy, noting that 22,000 Italian companies in Romania employ 600,000 Romanians.

A report this month by the Catholic charities Caritas and Migrants estimated that 3.7m foreigners lived in Italy, making up 6.2 per cent of the total population.

Italy and Japan had the fastest declining populations and the lowest birth rates in the world, the report noted, stressing the need for immigrant labour.

Births to immigrant mothers in Italy accounted for about half of all those registered between 1995 and 2005. Immigrants last year accounted for one sixth of property buyers and approaching half of those who needed a first home.

"There is no reason to view immigrants as a burden," the report concludes.

In the forefront of the public uproar over the killing of Mrs Reggiani are the Roma, or gypsies. Italian media, carrying reports from the home village of the suspected killer, say he was

from the Roma community. Church groups estimate there are 50,000 Romanian Roma in Italy.

Gianfranco Fini, leader of the post-fascist party, the National Alliance, said in a newspaper interview that the Roma could not be integrated into Italian society. He called on the government to expel more than 200,000 immigrants.

Mr Prodi made it clear to the FT that there would be no mass deportations.

Interview transcript at: www.ft.com/europe