

Italian government ignored geologists' warnings

147 people killed in mudslides

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At least 147 people were killed and many more are still missing after severe rains caused a series of massive mudslides May 5 in the region of Campania in southern Italy. Volunteers and emergency workers are still digging through the mud trying to recover bodies of people not yet accounted for. Heavy rains continue in the region and more mudslides are expected.

Government authorities have called the tragedy a natural disaster and have exchanged accusations for the bureaucratic delays that added to the death toll. But there has been ample evidence that this was a manmade disaster that could have been avoided.

For the past half-century geologists have warned about the construction of towns and housing in the region, declaring it a 'risk zone' prone to mudslides. During the past 70 years 631 landslides have hit this region near Naples. Since 1945, 3,800 people have been killed in Italy from mudslides. The majority have been in southern Italy. On average this means six deaths every month from mud slides. The authorities have ignored scientists' consistent warnings rather than regulate construction and furnish money that could have prevented the tragic deaths and destruction.

This part of Italy has been described as consisting of sedimentary mountains, which geologists say will eventually fall into the Tyrrhenian Sea, even if not inhabited. Its soil has the tendency to crumble with the frequent rain and wild fire. Gianmaria Laccarino, of the Department of Earth Science at the University of Naples, studied landslides that hit the area in 1966, 1974, 1986 and 1997. He says the areas have been made even more unstable because of the structural work on the weak ground and slopes to create streets and build homes.

The towns overwhelmed by the numerous May 5 landslides are Irpina, Salernitano, Sarno, Quindici,

Episcopio, Taurano, and Bracigliano. These small towns are only several of 230 that are between the provinces of Avellino and Salerno in the area of Naples. They were built at the slopes of Alvano Mountain with an altitude of 1,300 meters. Most devastated were the towns of Sarno and Quindici..

Another reason for the constant landslides is the removal of chestnut trees from the surrounding hills. These trees are strong and helped to hold the ground together with their roots. In their place farmers have planted hazelnut trees which are much weaker and produce a small root system. The chestnut trees were pulled out because hazelnut trees are more profitable.

The most dangerous areas are inhabited by workers and the poor. The inferior construction of housing, schools, and hospitals, and other infrastructure contributed directly to the extent of the tragedy. There are no serious laws requiring architects or engineers to inspect a site and deem it safe for building.

The hospital in Sarno, Villa Marta, was completely destroyed with at least six of the hospital staff killed. Many more would have died if workers had not carried out the 60 patients on the second floor. The hospital had been erected in one of the most dangerous areas. The final work to construct a new hospital had been stopped due to government budget cuts required under the plan for Italy's entry into European Union. The almost completed, but unused, new hospital was not damaged.

A middle school was also destroyed trapping many teachers and students whose bodies have still not been found. Government officials looked the other way when the hospital and school was erected, and when hundreds of homes were established at the weakest slope. Many politicians came to the funerals of the victims in order to diffuse anger against the government. When family

members held them responsible for the tragedy, the officials arrogantly remained silent and hurriedly left in their government cars.

The government's bureaucratic mismanagement also contributed to the high death toll. When the heavy rains began on Sunday, May 3 authorities did not declare a state of emergency and gave no instructions to evacuate the areas. Authorities of the Civil Protection never bothered to return a phone call from the mayor of Sarno who was calling for help as a torrent of mud, rocks and broken trees were tumbling down toward his building and the city.

Rescuers from Civil Protection arrived only hours later, well into the dark rainy night. This made it almost impossible to operate helicopters and other equipment to reach survivors. Underestimating the extent of the landslides, the government sent only a few earth-moving machines that quickly got stuck in the mud. By the morning of Wednesday, May 6, volunteers were forced to dig with their bare hands. Valuable time was lost and by Thursday, the continued rains and mudslides forced a halt to the rescue operations in many areas.

As of May 15, 1998, the number of dead was reported at 147, with nearly 200 still missing. Over 1,500 people lost all of their possessions.

Romano Prodi, the prime minister of Italy, ensured money to rebuild these affected zones and to provide jobs for the youth. However, these statements did not calm the area's residents who have heard such promises before. Previously 25 billion lira was allocated southern Italy, the country's poorest region, but was never sent. In many cases, when money is sent local governments turn over municipal affairs to organized crime which awards work to their own construction firms.

Even as people were seeking to recover from the tragedy there was talk in government circles that spending too much will hurt Italy's budget and its chances to enter the European Union.

Geologists have long requested the government to institute and enforce strict building codes, build huge cemented blocks near weak slopes to stabilize the ground and construct artificial channels to direct rainfalls. Rather than listen to these warnings of experts, the government has responded by cutting the funds for the Center of Geological studies. Out of the 12,000 members of the institute only 3,000 work full-

time. Thousands of graduates in geology and earth studies remain unemployed.

Advanced scientific techniques used by geologists to understand and warn of these types of disasters have made it more and more possible to avoid such tragedies. This only underscores the criminal responsibility of the Italian capitalist class and its political representatives who hold profits to be far more important than human lives.



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