

Italian officials ignored tenants' complaints in apartment building collapse

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For two years before the collapse of an Italian apartment building, which killed 67 people, tenants complained to local officials that they feared the building was unsafe. Only days before the disaster a group of engineers sent by authorities told the nervous residents that the building was safe and that they could sleep peacefully.

But in the early morning hours of November 11 the apartment building in Foggia, Italy in Viale Giotto collapsed, killing many of the tenants as they slept and others as they tried to escape. Minutes before the structure crumbled some residents heard loud cracking sounds, waking them. They knocked on doors, trying to wake other tenants, and escaped only moments before the building collapsed.

It took literally seconds for the building to fall on itself, floor atop floor. Only 15 people survived the crash. Many of those who perished died a slow death, trapped in the mass of pillars with oxygen running out, or burned by the explosion of gas pipes. A number of bodies were found in the stairways, indicating that they were overcome trying to escape the building.

Investigators of the collapse say the building's foundation was built with cheap materials on a shallow water table. Over time the wet soil had destabilized the already flawed foundation.

For two years residents of the building had been telling the mayor of the city, the civil officer, and any officials who would listen that they heard cracking noises, and could see their building deteriorating on a daily basis. They pointed out that cement pillars, meant to hold up the structure, were cracking. They also noted that damage to the pillars created dangerous conditions in the building's stairways.

On June 17, 1997, more than two years before the collapse, tenants sent a letter to the city government,

but their complaint was filed in the drawer of the office of Procurator Baldassare Virzi'. Tenants continued to complain about the condition of the structure. This past summer tenants reported seeing steel rods protruding from the concrete pillars.

Fifteen days before the crash 12 tenant families wrote another letter to local authorities stating how a high-ranking official of Foggia, Gabriella Sorbilli-Lasco, had never concerned herself with this life-threatening situation. In response to their complaints, a group of engineers was sent to inspect the building. Just days before the crash, these engineers assured the residents that the building was safe.

There are four other apartment buildings in the area with similar structures, housing 300 people in all. Only a block separates these structures from the one in Viale Giotto. They were all built according to the same plan as the doomed building and are at imminent risk of collapse.

Three of these buildings are owned by the Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari (IACP)—Autonomous Institute Public Housing—headed by Francesco Paolo Belmonte. An emergency evacuation order was issued several months ago for one of these buildings, but it was only carried out following the collapse of the building in Viale Giotto.

Belmonte had been fined \$100 in October 1998 by the municipal police chief, Bruno Russo, after he inspected the building. The building owner paid the small fine, but Russo never reported the safety violations to higher authorities. Belmonte said it would cost \$82,000 per tenant to fix the building.

Tenants of this building were evacuated by firemen knocking at their doors, forcing them to leave without gathering all their belongings. The working class families in these buildings spend much of their income

on rent, and were worried where they would not be able to find other apartments. One was quoted as saying, “We refuse to leave unless you give us proper housing.”

The tragedy in Foggia was not a new experience for Italian apartment dwellers. A year earlier, on December 16, 1998, a building in the Portuense section of Rome collapsed, claiming 27 lives. The survivors still live in hotels. On July 14, 1994 a retirement home in Pavia collapsed, killing 28 elderly people.

A recent Italian census found that 3 million buildings in the country are at risk. Many working class families are caught in an impossible situation: without adequate income to afford a safe place to live, they are forced to remain in buildings that could collapse at any time.



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