

Earthquake in Abruzzo exposes corruption in Italian building industry

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A week after the devastating earthquake in Abruzzo, the full extent of the damage and destruction is still not apparent.

Around half of the estimated 40,000 left homeless by the quake are being temporarily housed in 32 camping areas surrounding the town of L'Aquila. A series of aftershocks following the main quake have added to the trauma of survivors.

So far, a total of 291 bodies have been dug out of the ruins, but aid services have declared that it will take some time until they have been able to clear away all of the rubble and exclude the possibility of additional victims.

It is estimated that 687 towns and communities were affected by the quake. The total of collapsed or heavily damaged houses is reckoned at nearly half a million. According to satellite pictures, the entire town of L'Aquila has shifted by 15 centimetres.

Grief and shock have given way in the last week to growing anger as it has become clear that much of the destruction could have been avoided. Inhabitants are alarmed by the fact that many buildings, including recently built constructions, were turned into piles of rubble by the quake, while other buildings in the immediate vicinity remained largely intact. One example is two buildings on the Via Campo di Fossa in L'Aquila. One of the houses was razed to the ground, killing 26 of the building's 29 inhabitants, while the second house survived without serious damage.

According to Franco Barberi, chairman of the Commission for Protection Against Catastrophes, "In California there would not have been such casualties from a similar earthquake." He said the large number of victims in the Italian quake was largely due to the poor quality of buildings in the region, with many lacking adequate safeguards against the danger of earthquakes.

The new hospital in L'Aquila and a student accommodation building—both public constructions built with taxpayer money—were not built according to modern specifications, including protective measures against earthquakes. Both buildings collapsed in the quake. While there were no deaths in the hospital collapse, six people died when the student building fell to ground.

The collapse of the hospital has sparked questions about Italy's biggest building company, IMPREGILO. This firm was formerly part of the Fiat Group and is currently part of a consortium of companies consisting of Benetton, Gavio and Ligresti.

The company won the bid for the construction of the San Salvatore hospital in L'Aquila in 1991. Last week's earthquake revealed that the company used low-quality concrete mixed heavily with sand. A preliminary investigation of the ruins has further shown that the steel reinforcements used in the building were corroded and gave way easily.

This was the conclusion reached by Paolo Clemente, a civil engineer with the authority for technology and environment, ENEA, which has examined a number of the ruined buildings. Clemente declared it was likely that the building company had used sand from the coast, which was much less pure than building sand. Such a practice is common in Italian building by companies seeking to maximise their profits.

The fragility of the construction was compounded by defects in the steel girders used. According to Clemente: "So far we have been able to establish from our investigation of the ruins that the lower levels of the building collapsed because the steel reinforcements used in the concrete were defective."

Paolo Buzzetti, president of the Association of Building Employers, ANCE, admitted, "There can be no question that poor quality concrete had been used. If the building had been correctly built it would have been able to withstand the vibrations of the quake."

The investigations have already made clear that much of the construction in the region, which is known to be earthquake prone, not only failed to provide extra protection against quakes, but failed to meet even the most elementary construction standards.

The state attorney's office has commenced an investigation, but has so far refused to name any suspects.

According to Alessandro Martelli, a researcher for ENEA and professor of seismology and building science at the University of Ferrara, an investigation into the earthquake in Molise in 2002 exposed many irregularities in public buildings, schools and children's nurseries, including the use of inferior concrete. In some cases, inspectors were able to simply push their fingers

through the remains of shoddily built walls.

However, it is very likely that a criminal investigation into the latest earthquake will be contained or scuttled at the behest of the national government.

For the past week, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has traveled repeatedly to the earthquake region, surrounded by employees of his media empire. He has promised to rebuild all the houses that were destroyed, while at the same time playing down the social and political ramifications of the earthquake.

According to the prime minister, the quake was an act of fate that nobody could have predicted. At one point, he said that the tens of thousands of homeless victims should regard their housing under canvas as a “camping holiday.” Following a wave of indignation at this comment, Berlusconi backtracked and declared he would be prepared to house a handful of the victims in three of his many villas.

Berlusconi knows only too well that a thorough investigation into the role of building firms in the region would have implications for his government and would cast light on his own rise to prominence, which had its foundations in the Italian construction industry.

In 2003, the government headed by Berlusconi passed a decree stipulating norms for the construction industry following the collapse of a school during the earthquake that struck San Gilliano di Puglia. These norms have not been properly enforced, however, and their implementation has been blocked by a lobby of property and construction concerns.

The government headed by Romano Prodi between 2006 and 2008 did nothing to ensure that these norms were enforced.

The IMPREGILO building company has repeatedly hit the headlines recently in connection with accusations of corruption. The company was involved in the construction of a waste disposal unit for the city of Naples—a project that was delayed for decades as a result of allegations of links between the firm and organised crime.

Following the reelection of Berlusconi in 2008, IMPREGILO had high hopes of winning a number of lucrative construction contracts, and the company’s share value soared. IMPREGILO expects to be awarded the contract for a bridge to be built between the Italian mainland and Sicily—the longest such suspension bridge to be built anywhere in the world. The Messina Bridge project is priced at €6 billion, and Berlusconi has repeated his intention to go ahead with the construction, despite the current economic and financial crisis.

Last Friday, the newspaper *Il Manifesto* called for a halt to Berlusconi’s prestige project, arguing that the money would be better spent rebuilding the houses lost in the quake and promoting better building standards across the country.

For his part, Berlusconi has promised to completely rebuild the devastated town of L’Aquila, restoring the damaged medieval areas of the city and at the same time building a completely new adjoining city—a “L’Aquila 2.” Berlusconi says his models for such a project are the cityscapes “Milano 2

and Milano 3”—huge concrete housing projects erected by Berlusconi when he began his career as a businessman in Milan.

In fact, Berlusconi’s earlier activities in the building industry reveal many of the problems that plague the modern Italian construction industry. His rise to prominence began with his management of a small building company on the outskirts of Milan. Berlusconi was able to take over the leading construction firm Edilnord and commenced the huge apartment block projects Milano 2 and Milano 3.

Much of the capital raised by Berlusconi for his building projects is alleged to have come from the coffers of the secret society Propaganda 2, headed by the former fascist Licio Gelli, who maintained close links to political, military and business circles, as well as the secret services and Mafia. Berlusconi reportedly took up membership in this secret society in 1978.

Berlusconi’s subsequent meteoric rise in political circles was made possible primarily by the intervention of his political godfather—the head of the Italian Socialist Party, Bettino Craxi. Together with the longstanding Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti, Craxi embodies the network of bribery and corruption that has come to be known as Tangentopoli.

When Berlusconi became prime minister for a second time in 2001, he transferred the remaining parts of his building empire to his brother. Since then, Berlusconi has held a protective hand over the activities of his brother and the building industry as a whole.

The extent of corrupt practices in the Italian building industry is shown by the comments made by the state attorney in L’Aquila, Alfredo Rossini. Rossini told the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* that it would be difficult to avoid Mafia involvement in plans for the rebuilding of the city. “We are in contact with the national anti-Mafia authority,” Rossini declared,” in order to ensure that the building program does not encourage the Mafia, which would see the reconstruction as a chance to promote their own business interests.”



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