

Warnings suppressed

Over two hundred victims in Italian earthquake

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8 April 2009

The earthquake that shook central Italy early Monday morning has already claimed the lives of at least 228 victims. It destroyed some 15,000 buildings, leaving up to 100,000 people homeless. The death toll is expected to rise in the coming days as rescuers dig through rubble in conditions made worse by low temperatures, rain, the rugged terrain of the region and aftershocks.

The quake, which registered 6.3 on the Richter scale, struck the mountainous region of Abruzzo some 110 kilometres northeast of Rome. Aftershocks have continued to plague the region even as thousands of the homeless remain housed in makeshift tents.

The quake was centred on the medieval city of L'Aquila, where entire housing blocks were razed to the ground. The city (total population of 68,000) lies just 1 kilometre from the quake's epicentre. A total of 26 settlements across the region are reported to have been affected. After concentrating on the main urban centres, rescue workers are increasingly focusing their efforts on the more remote settlements, which in turn may well reveal an increased number of victims.

Lying on the tectonic plate that separates the continents of Europe and Africa, Italy is one of the most seismically active countries in Europe, and tremors are a common occurrence. In 1915, 30,000 people were killed in an earthquake that struck Avezzano, 25 miles south of yesterday's disaster. In 1980, an earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale, south of Naples, killed more than 2,700 people and injured several thousand more. Another quake in 1997 killed 11 and destroyed 80,000 homes.

The earthquake on Monday is thought to have been triggered along a faultline some tens of miles long. As the fault was pulled open, rock on either side slipped, sending out powerful shockwaves.

Some residents in the town of L'Aquila said the government had failed to take action despite tremors in the region growing worse over the past few months. The first tremors were felt in mid-January and continued at regular intervals, creating mounting alarm. One woman whose home collapsed said that there was a severe jolt a week ago.

Maria Francesco, a survivor of the earthquake who lives in L'Aquila, said: "It's a scandal what's happened. For the past three months, there have been regular tremors, and they've been getting stronger and stronger. The authorities were well aware."

Warnings given

Not only was Monday's quake preceded by a series of tremors, it had been predicted with some accuracy by one leading scientist. The disaster took place just weeks after a warning was given by a researcher that a "disastrous seismic event" was imminent in the region. Giampaolo Giuliani, from the National Physical Laboratory of Gran Sasso, warned of the dangers of a quake after sensors in the L'Aquila region detected radon gas escaping from the ground.

Following Giuliani's warning, vans with loudspeakers were driven around the medieval town, urging residents to evacuate their homes. This campaign was then wound down after Giuliani was reported by the local authorities to the police for "scare-mongering." He was then put under pressure to withdraw his warning and remove information he had placed on the Internet. Giuliani had made a video and included an interview on the Internet in

which he warned that a “disastrous seismic event” was on its way.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was among the first to dismiss Giuliani’s warning and told a press conference after the quake that there was “no scientific basis” to any suggestion that the earthquake had been predicted.

In response to claims by other scientists that it was not possible to predict earthquakes, Giuliani told the Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera*: ‘It is utterly false to say that we cannot predict seismic events. We can. We have been able to do so for 10 years. We have been seeing these signs.... I too have been evacuated; we have lived the worst night of our lives.’

Giuliani’s research has been supported by other leading seismologists and experts in the field.

Shoddy construction and corruption

There is considerable evidence that the damage inflicted by Monday’s quake could have been minimised by the planned evacuation of residents. At the same time, it is also apparent that the high toll of deaths and casualties is directly attributable to the shoddy construction standards that prevail throughout the entire country.

“Buildings are the main killers when earthquakes strike,” wrote the Geneva-based UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. In the case of L’Aquila, many of the collapsed buildings were “old structures which did not meet modern seismic standards,” it said.

According to a 2008 report by Italian geologists and civil protection experts, nearly half of Italy’s territory is considered “dangerous” in relation to seismic activity—but only 14 percent of buildings adhere to seismic safety standards.

One leading geologist and disaster expert, Franco Barberi, told Italian state television that with correct building standards, including anti-seismic protection, it would have been possible to avoid any deaths for a quake of this scale.

The damage caused in the town of L’Aquila included a number of its precious medieval buildings. According to initial estimates, nearly half of the city’s medieval centre has been razed to the ground. Nevertheless, despite the damage done to such older buildings, the fact remains that medieval or even ancient monuments and structures were

frequently constructed on a sounder basis than many of Italy’s modern building and housing projects.

A large number of the buildings that have been destroyed in L’Aquila are just 10-15 years old. According to one city resident, Nicoletta Giusti: “We always told ourselves that everything here would be able to withstand an earthquake, but it’s obvious that they took cost-cutting shortcuts like using, I don’t know, inferior cement or not enough steel.”

Rescue efforts have been hampered by the collapse of L’Aquila’s new public hospital, which was built in 2000. La Stampa newspaper quoted Paolo Rocchi, an architect and university professor on the conservation of historic buildings: “I am really startled that a reinforced concrete hospital in a highly seismic zone can be so devastated to be declared off-limits. It’s absurd.”

To cut corners and increase profits, building companies often use inferior materials, and there is a long tradition of corruption in the Italian public works and construction industry.

Just a few weeks ago, judges convicted five people in the 2002 collapse of a school in a 5.4-magnitude quake. Prosecutors alleged shoddy construction was a factor in the tragedy in southern Italy that claimed 28 lives, including the small town’s entire first grade.

Prime Minister Berlusconi, who rushed to assure the media that this latest quake and the damage it caused was an unavoidable act of fate, made his own fortune in the building industry before shedding large parts of his empire to his brother Paolo. In recent years, Paolo Berlusconi has been repeatedly accused of malpractice and bribery in relation to his own practices as head of the family’s building concerns.



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