

Earthquakes shake northern Italy

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For the past two weeks, the residents of the northern Italian region of Emilia Romagna have lived in fear and terror. On Sunday, May 20, an earthquake measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale struck the area between Modena and Ferrara, killing 7 and injuring more than 50.

Then on Tuesday, a second large earthquake shook the region. Its epicentre lay between Bologna, Parma and Verona and was followed by several hundred small aftershocks. This time, 17 people lost their lives under the debris, and at least 350 were injured.

Around 15,000 people are homeless or are spending the night outdoors fearful that new tremors could cause their ramshackle houses to collapse.

Numerous historical buildings from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, steeples, town halls, churches and palaces were destroyed. Amongst the casualties of the quake were the beautiful city centres of Carpi and Finale Emilia in Ferrara. There, the Torre dell'Orologio (Clock Tower), the historical landmark of the city, has been reduced to a pile of rubble.

Most of the victims of the quake were buried under the ruins of factories and warehouses. Four shift workers died in the first quake on May 20. The earthquake toppled three factories that were not particularly old—the aluminium foundry in Tecopress, the ceramic works of St. Augustine and another plant in Bondeno.

On Tuesday, an engineer and two labourers were killed in the course of examining the damage to a factory hit by the first quake. During their inspection, the building collapsed and buried the men under debris.

Hundreds of factories are closed and 7,000 workers have been sent home, where they wait full of uncertainty. The earthquake has caused damage estimated at more than €2 billion (US\$2.5 billion) at production facilities in the highly industrialised region of Emilia Romagna. Those hardest hit are working

class families who are now deprived of their income.

People are spending the nights in tents, in cars in parking lots, and in the countryside. Entire town centres have been closed down, and in some cities (such as Finale Emilia), gas and water pipes were destroyed by the aftershocks. In Modena, an entire hospital was evacuated. Seriously ill patients were transported to other cities, and the rest were sent home.

The cause of the quake is shifts in the Adriatic and the Eurasian tectonic plates. This results in powerful tectonic tensions, which are then discharged by the earthquake. The affected region was not on the list of most hazardous earthquake zones, but now an especially dangerous situation has developed. The tremors have set moist gravel, mud and sand in motion in the vicinity of the Po River, and houses face the risk of sinking into underground cavities long after the earthquake.

Though the statements by geologists were of great concern to those affected, even more pressing was the lack of clear information and assistance from political sources. The situation of thousands of people is becoming increasingly desperate. Along with grief and despair, residents are also increasingly angry with the government.

When Prime Minister Mario Monti visited St. Augustine on May 21, he was greeted by a chorus of whistles and boos. A group of women who had spent the night outdoors shouted, “Shame on you thieves, you should have stayed at home!”

Monti was more concerned with his media image than the fate of the victims, the women told the press. “We have so many problems, we are angry and afraid. Is it asking too much to expect the state to help us?” the women declared.

Just three days before the first earthquake on May 17, the Monti government published a decree to reform civil defence. According to the new law, the state is

relieved of any obligation to recompense citizens for damages caused by natural disasters. Instead, citizens are expected to insure themselves against such damages with private insurance companies—a huge boost for the insurance industry.

On Facebook and Twitter, demands are circulating for the cancellation of the National Day Parade in Rome planned for June 2 and for the money saved to be used for the reconstruction of Emilia Romagna. The celebration commemorates the referendum held on June 2, 1946, when Italians agreed to found the post-war republic after the Second World War. The Italian state president, Giorgio Napolitano, former leader of the Italian Communist Party, has indignantly dismissed the suggestion to cancel his parade.

A particular source of anger is the fact that the government raised the tax on the price of gasoline by two cents following the earthquake. Gasoline had already risen to record heights prior to the latest increase.

Since taking office, Monti, at the head of an unelected technocrat government, has introduced budget cuts amounting to €80 billion at the expense of pensioners, workers and the socially disadvantaged. His government has deregulated the labour market and undermined regulations protecting workers against dismissal. Monti's regime has the support of Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom (PdL) party as well as the Democrats and the trade unions.

Monti has also introduced new taxes on homes, buildings and land (IMU). Several mayors of the municipalities in the earthquake zone are now calling on the government to immediately suspend the IMU taxes and for a freeze on the latest austerity measures.

The government, however, is determined not to back down. It imposed a state of emergency over the region of Emilia Romagna on May 22, which has since been extended. It has so far released just €50 million in emergency aid for earthquake zones—a completely inadequate sum.

The city of L'Aquila, in Abruzzo, which was destroyed by a severe earthquake in April 2009, has yet to be rebuilt despite all the promises from political circles.

The earthquakes in the Emilia Romagna region have taken place in a period of growing social and political tensions.

The huge level of dissatisfaction with the political leadership was evident in the second round of local elections on May 20-21. All of the traditional parties suffered heavy losses, in particular Berlusconi's PdL and the Northern League of Umberto Bossi. None of the seven Northern League candidates in northern Italy were elected. The Democratic Party (PD), the successor to the Communist Party, also lost out to candidates from outside the conventional political spectrum.

Voters in Palermo elected Leoluca Orlando, who has a reputation as an opponent of the Mafia; in Turin, Democrat Marco Doria, an outsider, was elected. In Parma, the electorate chose a member of Beppe Grillo's "five star" organisation, who polled more than 60 percent, defeating the Democratic candidate to become mayor. So-called Grillini, who seek to exploit populist rage against corrupt politicians, have now won elections in five municipalities in northern Italy.

The government has responded to the increased political tension by extending the powers of the army to intervene inside the country. On May 18, two days before the first earthquake, the Italian interior office decreed that the army could be mobilised to protect businesses and public agencies "against terrorism".

Interior Minister Anna Maria Cancellieri told the newspaper *La Repubblica* that the deployment of the army for the protection of such agencies and businesses is "a viable solution". Together with the Italian secret service, the police and the army are preparing "contingency plans", providing for the use of up to 20,000 soldiers.



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