

# Devastating earthquake hits Italy

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At least 200 people died after an earthquake struck Italy early Wednesday morning. The earthquake lasted only twenty seconds, but it destroyed an entire region. Hundreds of people are still missing. Thousands were injured and tens of thousands have been left homeless.

The number of casualties could be much higher than reported so far, since many mountain villages are so remote that their destroyed roads can only be reached with difficulty and with the help of heavy equipment.

The earthquake measured 6.2 on the Richter scale and was felt in the capital city of Rome. Its epicentre was in the mountainous region bordered by Lazio, Abruzzi, Marche and Umbria. There were eight aftershocks before midday on Wednesday in an approximately 100-kilometre-long strip on the western flank of Abruzzi.

The region in the south of Perugia affected by the earthquake reaches to the northeast up to Ascoli and to the southwest almost all the way to Rieti. In all of the towns in this area numerous houses, churches, streets, bridges and fortifications have been destroyed.

The powerful earthquake surprised people in their sleep shortly before 4 am on Wednesday. The early morning light revealed a horrific sight in the villages and cities in the region. Entire families were buried under the rubble and entire city centres were wiped out. "Not a single house has been left habitable. We need a tent city for the entire population," the mayor of Accumoli reported at midday. "Half of our area no longer exists. The people are buried under the rubble," said the mayor of Amatrice.

The city centre of Amatrice has been completely destroyed. The church clock stopped at 3:36 am. The hospital is damaged. Doctors, caregivers and nurses are improvising patient care outdoors, including everything from emergency room services to hospital wards. Severely injured people in the outskirts of town were laid out on the street and had to wait in the heat for hours before ambulances picked them up. People all over Italy have been asked to donate blood; their eagerness to help has been overwhelming.

Scarcely a single house in Accumoli remains habitable.

There are mountains of rubble everywhere, bizarre jumbles of household appliances, water pipes, wrecked cars, beams and roofing tiles. These are interspersed with grotesquely broken walls and buildings. With their bare hands, aid personnel struggled to unearth survivors, who gained their attention with shrieks and half-smothered calls for help. Ambulances cannot get through the debris. Instead, people are lifted on stretchers over the fields of rubble and passed from man to man. Damaged electric, gas and water lines are making the rescue work more difficult and dangerous.

The authorities are asking people to remain outdoors and refrain from re-entering their houses. However, there are not enough safe emergency accommodations for everyone. A spokesperson for the National Civil Defence said on television on Wednesday that aid operations were not initiated until several hours after the earthquake, much later than they should have been. There is still not enough of anything. Too few ambulances, helicopters, and emergency centres are available. In spite of the hundreds of volunteer helpers, there are not enough well-equipped rescue teams with search dogs and search devices to locate and save survivors trapped under the rubble.

However, the earthquake did not come as a surprise.

Italy has frequent earthquakes, often with devastating repercussions. They are caused by the juncture of two tectonic plates, which run along the Apennines Mountains. The meeting of the plates produces tensions that are repeatedly eased through severe earthquakes. The experience of recent years has made it clear that the danger of such earthquakes has not abated over time. In particular, there was the case of the catastrophic earthquake in L'Aquila in 2009, which left over 300 people dead.

Much about this most recent earthquake is reminiscent of the 2009 earthquake. That earthquake measured 6.3 on the Richter scale and took 309 lives, including many children and youth. Sixty-seven thousand people became homeless.

At that time, thousands of scientists all over the world

signed an open letter in which they called on the Italian government to drastically improve its earthquake prevention. To this day, no serious measures have been implemented to this end. Instead, six seismologists were given prison sentences because they had not warned the population about the coming earthquake.

The geophysicists defended themselves by referring to earthquake maps and guidelines for quake-resistant construction that had been in the possession of the government for a long time. On paper, there are strict building requirements that hold for all seismic risk areas, but things are much different in practice.

Of course there are many very old historical buildings that cannot meet the requirements. However, the collapse of new buildings and the extensive damage to hospitals, schools and state agencies clearly indicate the use of shoddy building practices and materials. Private profit and corruption prevent the implementation of effective prevention.

National civil protection is also totally inadequate. While the government is spending billions on war preparations against Libya, it has no money for an appropriate number of rescue units, emergency stations and other necessary precautions.

The earthquake in L'Aquila seven years ago already made it clear that the buildings that were built in the last part of the twentieth century, beginning in the 1970s, did not conform with earthquake protection guidelines at all. They were built with too little steel and concrete and put together with bad cement. Nothing about this situation has changed since that catastrophe.

More than 8,000 uprooted people still live in the outskirts of L'Aquila in so-called "new towns." The provisional wooden lodgings that were quickly built after the earthquake in 2009 are now themselves so dilapidated that they are no longer livable.



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