Death toll in Italian earthquake climbs to more than 250

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One day after the devastating earthquake in central Italy, the death toll has climbed to more than 250. On Thursday evening, the Italian government declared a state of emergency.

Italy's civil defence organisation earlier reported that 215 people had been pulled from the rubble in the earthquake region of Gran Sasso, with an additional 400 injured. In the destroyed villages of Amatrice, Accumoli, Arquata and Pescara del Tronto and the surrounding area, tens of thousands have lost all their belongings.

Throughout the night, volunteers continued to dig in hopes of saving those still buried alive. Civil defence and fire rescue services set up camps and army units have been called in.

The fear of aftershocks persists. According to the United States Geological Survey, 13 additional quakes were registered in Gran Sasso by Thursday evening, each with a magnitude of at least 2.5 on the Richter scale. As a precaution, the water reservoir at the Scandarello Lake Dam will be drained.

It is still unclear how many people actually remained in the numerous mountain villages on Tuesday. In any case, it is a much greater number than the normal population. An unusually large number of children are among the victims. It is a popular time for vacations in Italy and many families traditionally send their children to visit grandparents in the mountains.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi cancelled all appointments Wednesday morning in order to visit the disaster region. He promised all possible support to the population. "We will neglect no one," he said, adding that rebuilding would take place "swiftly and effectively."

The earthquake took the Renzi government by surprise. All of the warnings that followed the 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila had apparently come to nothing. No improvements had been made and any funds provided for them had leaked into the wrong channels. Renzi promised at a press conference that this time things would "not be as they were in L'Aquila." Seven years after the earthquake there, thousands of people still live in intolerable emergency housing.

Today in Italy, one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world, only 30 percent of all buildings meet the legal requirements for earthquake safety. These numbers were revealed by ENEA, the Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development. Approximately 500 Italian hospitals were classified as vulnerable to earthquakes.

It is no accident that a primary school collapsed in Accumoli and a hospital and a hotel were destroyed in Amatrice. A new school building that also collapsed in the same location had been officially classified as earthquake proof.

On Thursday evening, Renzi's cabinet met to declare a state of emergency and decide on relief measures. Renzi announced in a statement: "In the next hours, days and weeks, we must brace ourselves for a state of emergency. But digging out survivors remains our top priority. Italy weeps for its countrymen and shows the whole world its tears, but also the big heart of its volunteers, civil defence and governmental authorities."

Other politicians have also discovered the "big heart of the volunteers." Beppe Grillo of the Five Star Movement posted a similar comment online, in which he wrote: "Let us show our solidarity and recall that the Italians have a big heart." In rare agreement with the government and the EU, against whom he otherwise spars so aggressively, Grillo appealed for quick aid

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measures. He called on the EU to make the European emergency fund available to the victims of the earthquake.

The Italian news media has also cited this "big-heartedness" and published images of overcrowded blood donation centres with the comment: "Parents and children, schoolmates, office workers and pensioners—all wait patiently for hours to donate blood for quake victims" (*la Repubblica*).

While the solidarity and willingness to help among the population is overwhelming, the grand statements of the ruling class leave a bitter aftertaste.

The politicians shed crocodile tears while at the same time preparing for war and further social cuts. The same propaganda machinery that elsewhere bemoans the innate propensity to violence and depravity of "human nature" has suddenly discovered the energy and generosity of people who must now, of course, "sacrifice whatever is necessary."

Such hypocrisy is typical and by no means new. More than a hundred years ago, the great Marxist Rosa Luxemburg pointed it out during another terrible natural disaster. When the Mount Pelée volcano erupted on the Caribbean island of Martinique in 1902, engulfing 40,000 people, her keen eye recognized the contradiction between the "humanist" posturing of the ruling elite and the cruel policies of war and colonialism that they were carrying out at the same time.

Amid the ruins of the disaster, the governments were again "one heart and one soul," wrote Luxemburg, contrasting this with the atrocities and colonial massacres that the same imperialists unleashed on Africans and Filipinos. She concluded her text with the words: "A day will come when another volcano will raise its thunderous voice, a volcano which seethes and boils, whether you know it or not, and will sweep the whole sanctimonious, blood-stained culture from the face of the earth."

Matteo Renzi has every reason to fear this "coming day." Just hours before he appeared as the devoted father of his country, he presented himself at the side of Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande on the Italian aircraft carrier Garibaldi. The European Union leaders are determined to proceed with their policies despite the Brexit, the UK vote to exit the EU. Those policies consist of enormous social attacks on the working class and joint military operations in Libya and the Middle East.

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