

# Earthquake disaster aggravates social crisis in Italy

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The severe earthquake in Italy two weeks ago caused widespread devastation in the Gran Sasso region and cost 295 people their lives. It has, moreover, intensified the social crisis in Italy.

In Amatrice, Accumoli, Pescara and Arquata del Tronto, many thousands lost their homes. About 4,000 people, including many small children, the disabled and elderly, are still living in makeshift camps or shelters, and about 400 injured are still in hospital. On Monday, September 5, the body of the last missing person, a young Afghan, was recovered. His brother had continued to search for him to the end.

Two weeks after the earthquake, it is becoming increasingly clear that this was a man-made disaster, brought about by corruption, negligence and irresponsibility on the part of the government.

In Amatrice, numerous buildings collapsed which were supposedly built to be earthquake-proof. One of these was the Romolo Capranica primary school, opened just four years ago. Its construction was supported with large amounts of money from a special fund for earthquake-resistant construction—and yet it collapsed. A church tower supposedly renovated so as to be earthquake-proof, collapsed, burying a family of four.

Also in Amatrice, the hospital, the Hotel Roma and many other buildings collapsed. The town accounts for 224 of a total of 295 deaths. In contrast, the small town of Norcia, in the middle of the earthquake zone, remained almost without any severe damage. Norcia, an exception, decided a few years ago to undertake the serious earthquake-proofing of its buildings. There was not a single death there.

The media has reported cases of building corruption and fraud, and almost unbelievable indifference. The state prosecutor's office has launched several

investigations for manslaughter, already visiting 15 debris fields. Senior State Attorney Giuseppe Saieva explained that what had happened was not simply a “tragic fate.” The buildings were apparently constructed with “more sand than cement,” he said, and in breach of all regulations.

It has long been known that in Italy, 70 percent of buildings are not earthquake-proof, even though more than 24 million people live in earthquake-prone areas, where there has been a severe earthquake on average every five years in the last 150 years. For 45 years, there have been legal requirements for earthquake-proof building, but they obviously apply only in theory.

As the anti-Mafia journalist Roberto Saviano noted in an article for *Die Zeit*, after the “wave of generosity and readiness to help,” now “a second wave of indignation and consternation about the fact that fraud, corruption and incompetence” dominate the tragedy.

The misery of the earthquake-stricken areas has exacerbated the social crisis and dissatisfaction with the government. Nearly 300 earthquake deaths point to the enormous irresponsibility of all Italy's governments over the last 50 years, and also condemn the present government of Matteo Renzi of the Democratic Party (PD).

As always, Renzi seeks to cover this over with lofty promises and phrasemongering. But after two and a half years of the Renzi government, it is well known that the words and deeds of this self-proclaimed “demolition man” stand diametrically opposed.

Renzi can currently be seen practically on a daily basis seeking to mollify earthquake victims. He even sent a message from the G20 summit in China promising help for the survivors. Renzi has appointed Vasco Errani (PD), former regional president of Reggio Emilia, as reconstruction commissioner. A project

called “Casa Italia” was launched, a “complex strategy for our country,” in order “to create the best conditions for life and work.”

According to Renzi, following the search for those trapped, now a whole new phase should begin. The Italian government supposedly wants to rebuild following new, safe guidelines. But this is the same promise made by every government following every earthquake, and none has kept it.

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For months, the Renzi government has been losing influence. Especially in May, when the working class took to the streets in France, Renzi’s poll numbers fell. It has become increasingly clear that in Italy, Renzi plays the same role as the Socialist Party politicians Francois Hollande and Manuel Valls in France; responding to the economic crisis with harsh attacks on the working class, deregulating the labour market and imposing drastic pension and education cuts.

Italy is a social powder keg, but the working class has not had a chance to articulate its opposition so far. The trade unions and pseudo-left groups have placed themselves on the side of the Renzi government and provide it flanking cover. For this reason, the protests have so far taken the form of support for the nationalist and pro-capitalist Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo. In the local elections in June, Grillo’s protest movement overtook Renzi’s PD, and the Five Star Movement has formed the city administrations in Rome and Turin.

The Renzi government has grandly announced “reforms” such as the “Jobs Act,” as well as pension and education reforms at the expense of the workers, the poor and the elderly. But this has still not enabled it to get a grip on the budget deficit, the banking crisis, or the high level of unemployment. The banking crisis has deprived thousands of small depositors of their savings, and the recent financial crisis threatens to trigger a run on the banks.

All this is contributing to the fact that confidence in the government is ebbing away constantly. His current pose as the country’s caring father for the earthquake victims cannot remedy this. At the end of August (after the earthquake), a poll found that Renzi could lose the forthcoming referendum with the “no” votes currently running eight points in front of the “yes” votes.

The referendum is to decide on a constitutional amendment changing the electoral law and severely limiting the Senate as a second parliamentary chamber. Renzi has linked its passage with his own political fate. It will be the first popular vote on his government’s policies, since previously he has never had to face the electorate. He secured his office as head of government three years ago in a sort of intra-party palace coup against Enrico Letta.

The British *Guardian* commented on the referendum: “If he wins, Renzi will have been chastened but ultimately vindicated by the vote. But if he loses, the reality of Italian politics is that no one is quite sure what will happen.” The newspaper sketches the scenario of a second “Brexit,” should the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement win the subsequent parliamentary election. Renzi himself has since denied he would resign if he loses the referendum. The elections, he stressed, “only take place in 2018.”



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