Another major earthquake strikes central Italy

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At 7:41 a.m. on Sunday, Italians in the central area of Marche and Umbria were woken by a violent earthquake, measuring 6.5 on the Richter scale, followed by at least 200 aftershocks over the course of the day. It was the biggest tremor in Italy since the 6.5 Irpinia earthquake in 1980, which devastated that southern Italian region with a tragic loss of nearly 3,000 lives, in addition to almost 9,000 people injured and 280,000 being made homeless.

The seismic event follows two other quakes in the same region. On August 24, an earthquake with a 6.2 magnitude hit close to Accumoli and Amitrice, killing nearly 300 people. Substantial sections of those two towns were razed to the ground. On October 26, two earthquakes took place within hours of one another, with epicenters in Castel Sant'Angelo sul Nera and Ussita, respectively. Those registered magnitudes of 5.5 and 5.9, and caused great damage, but fortunately no fatalities, except one elderly person who died of a heart attack.

Sunday's earthquake was felt throughout the peninsula, from the Venice area to the Puglia region, with reports that it was felt as far away as Austria. It has left nearly 30,000 people without homes in the area between Norcia, Preci (both in Umbria) and Castel Sant'Angelo sul Nera (Marche).

As of this writing, no fatalities have been reported, although a few dozen people were injured. Contributing to this outcome was the fact that several towns in the area had carried out preventive evacuation in the aftermath of the previous tremors.

In Norcia, a town where the retrofitting of several buildings saved many lives in this latest series of quakes, two of the oldest buildings, the Cathedral and the San Benedetto Basilica, collapsed. Other towns like Preci and Ussita reported extensive damage, with numerous houses and churches collapsing. Many historic structures, some dating back to medieval times, have been destroyed.

Railway traffic has come to a halt in several areas. Access to the region is now problematic. Roads are heavily damaged, making it difficult to provide aid. The road between Visso and Norcia collapsed and is currently unusable. Entire town centers, typically the oldest downtown sections, were reported destroyed. Helicopters were deployed to rescue those injured.

Collapses and damage were also reported in L'Aquila, the town gravely hit by the 2009 earthquake that resulted in 300 dead, 1,600 injured and 65,000 losing their homes.

In Rome, a city of 3 million people, the seismic activity caused cracks and visible damages. The San Paolo Basilica, which dates back to the first century AD, was closed to the public so the extent and gravity of several cracks could be assessed.

According to Italy's National Research Council-Institute of Environmental Geology and Geo-Engineering, the recent series of quakes could have been far worse: "On the one hand, this sequence [of shocks] is quite troubling; on the other, the lateral propagation [distribution] means that the quakes are strong, but not catastrophic," explained Director Paolo Messina.

"This process," continued Messina and expert Andrea Billi, "is affecting the central Apennines, where the fault's central area loses strength and the lateral volumes gain strength." This is the reason why so much seismic activity has concentrated in a relatively short time and delimited area. "Had all these segments moved simultaneously, they would have generated at least a 7.0 earthquake," commented Messina.

The situation remains quite unpredictable, however:

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“We can’t rule out new shocks. We don’t know how much energy has accumulated throughout the centuries in the fault that was activated last August.”

The reaction of Italy’s political establishment was predictable. Democratic Party Prime Minister Matteo Renzi issued perfunctory and hypocritical statements of reassurance: “We must, with full force, take care of the human aspect, verify that there really are no fatalities, take care of the injured —but at the same time all resources necessary to rebuild our country are at our disposal.”

All the major political parties, from Beppe Grillo’s pseudo-populist Five Star Movement (M5S) to Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, pledged support for Renzi’s government in the aftermath of the recent earthquakes.

None of these parties challenge the profit system, which lies behind the poor and disorganized response to natural disasters, a response that always has the greatest impact on Italy’s working class and poor. This was the case with the handling of the L’Aquila earthquake in 2009 and, even worse, in the Irpinia earthquake of 1980.

In 2009, many of the victims who lost their homes spent nearly eight months in tents. A year after the quake, the majority of the affected population were still left to find their own solutions, with the help of friends and family, given the long delays and utter inadequacy of government aid.

The earthquake revealed an ugly reality: building companies in L’Aquila, many of whom were working on government contracts to build schools and hospitals, had used inferior materials and taken other shortcuts, bypassing requirements making structures earthquake-proof.

The Irpinia earthquake also exposed pervasive corruption in the criminal management of public funds allocated for reconstruction of the area. In particular, Christian Democrat Ciriaco De Mita was a stockholder in the Banca Popolare dell’Irpinia, a financial institution that—it was later uncovered—made handsome profits from the management and transfer of funds allocated by the government.

More shameful yet were the conditions imposed on the victims, who lived in precarious and temporary shelters for years. To this day there are areas in the Campania region where temporary homeless shelters still exist and are often used by organized crime as operation centers, the same criminals who were complicit in the funds racket.

One can be certain that the government in Rome will only offer a pittance to the victims of the recent earthquakes, which will not be sufficient even to ensure a roof over their heads.

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