



Italy goes from doom to gloom

ERIC REGULY

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A devastating earthquake in northern Italy and a school bombing that killed a teenage girl in the deep south has left Italians shocked and grief-stricken at a time when the broken economy had already set collective nerves on edge.

By Sunday evening, rescue workers had confirmed six deaths and about 50 wounded in the powerful earthquake that hit the wealthy Emilia-Romagna region about 35 kilometres north of Bologna. As aftershocks struck the area, about 3,000 people were placed in emergency accommodations.

The earthquake hit at 4.04 a.m. Sunday, sending thousands of panicked Italians in their pyjamas onto the streets. The quake had a magnitude of 6.0, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, making it almost as strong as the 6.3 earthquake that hit L'Aquila, a mountain city in central Italy, on April 6, 2009, and killed more than 300 people.

Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti was in Chicago attending a NATO summit when the quake hit, and said he would leave early so he could return to Rome by Monday morning to deal with the earthquake and school bombing tragedies.

Television images of Emilia-Romagna showed collapsed factories and warehouses and many ruined buildings, including historic bell towers, churches and palaces. "After an initial survey, damage to cultural patrimony appears significant."

While earthquakes are common in Italy, one this powerful had not hit Emilia-Romagna for many centuries. Geologists warned that aftershocks could hit the region for days. "In the next hours, the tremors should get weaker, but we cannot exclude a quake like the one this morning," Stefano Gesta, president of the National Institute of Geophysics and Vulcanology, said in press interviews.

Gian Vito Graziano, president of CNG, Italy's geologists' association, said about 1.3 million Emilia-Romagna residents live in areas prone to earthquakes and warned that fairly modern buildings are especially risky. "The earthquake vulnerability is, above all, highest among factories and buildings erected before the end of the 1980s, which in general were planned without earthquake-protection standards," he said.

Mr. Monti will no doubt come under extreme pressure not to repeat the mistakes made by his predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi, after the L'Aquila earthquake. While the rescue effort was swift in L'Aquila, about 100 kilometres northeast of Rome, the city remains a ghost town because the promises of rapid reconstruction made by the Berlusconi government went largely unfulfilled.

The Canadian government is responsible for one of L'Aquila's few completed reconstruction projects – a \$5-million youth centre at the University of L'Aquila.

The earthquake came the day after the bomb attack in front of a vocational school in Brindisi, the Adriatic port in the heel of Italy. The 16-year-old victim was killed by a bomb made of

three gas canisters that exploded with terrific force, sending pieces of metal flying in all directions and engulfing some students in flames. At least five students were wounded.

The bombing stunned Italians everywhere because of its sheer terror value – an attack on innocent students. As police struggled to find a motive for the attack, theories were floated that it might have been the work of the local Mafia, known as the Sacra Corona Unita, or United Sacred Crown.

Supporters of the theory, including the mayor of Brindisi, noted that the bombing happened at a school named after Francesca Morvillo, a magistrate who was killed in Sicily by a Cosa Nostra bomb on May 23, 1992. Ms. Morvillo died along with with her husband, Giovanni Falcone, the famous Mafia prosecutor. An anti-Mafia rally to mark the 20th anniversary of their assassinations had been scheduled in Brindisi later on Sunday.

Brindisi prosecutors later dismissed the possible Sacra Corona connection as “improbable.” They said the planting of the bomb, captured by security video, was probably an isolated act and the work of one man. The Mafia does not have a history of random attacks on students or tourists.

Still, the school bombing horrified Italians, who were already rattled by the debt crisis, soaring unemployment and the double-dip recession. Recent, though relatively minor, terror attacks have only deepened public anxiety.