

Scientists Warn Unsafe Italian Schools Risk Earthquake Disaster

 REUTERS

Apr 4, 2014

By Naomi O'Leary

L'AQUILA, Italy (Reuters) - Italy risks disaster if its schools are not strengthened against earthquakes, leading geologists said on Friday, in a call for action before the fifth anniversary of a quake in the university town of L'Aquila that killed over 300.

Risk to life from earthquakes in Italy has worsened since the disaster on April 6, 2009, the National Council of Geologists warned at an event in the devastated city in the central Abruzzo region, saying buildings had continued to be constructed without respecting anti-earthquake regulations.

Standing outside a residence where seven students died, the council's president Gian Vito Graziano warned casualties may have been much higher if the earthquake had not struck at night.

"Some estimates say that if it happened at another time, when students were in their classrooms, the number of victims would have been thousands, not hundreds. It's hard to imagine you are unsafe in your school or university, but unfortunately in Italy this is the case," Graziano said under pouring rain.

The geologists argued that though the task would be enormous, country-wide improvements beginning with public buildings would boost the economy as well as saving lives.

While many cranes and cement mixers are at work in L'Aquila, much of the town's historic centre is unoccupied and frozen in the state it was shortly after the earthquake, with simple beams shoring up windows, doorways and cracked walls and vegetation beginning to encroach.

Entire streets are cordoned off because of the risk of falling masonry, saplings have taken root on the steps of the Regional Council building, and patterned curtains flap in the open windows of houses where the ceilings have collapsed.

The parents of some who perished in the disaster attended a prizegiving for two students who had written dissertations on earthquake preparation, held in the University of L'Aquila's newly constructed humanities building, along with others who had survived similar events.

Student Pia Antignani, 21, said she decided to help prevent further deaths after she was pulled from the rubble of her school five hours after it collapsed in a 2002 earthquake that killed 27 fellow pupils and a teacher. A court found they would not have died if anti-earthquake regulations were heeded.

"I study geology for my dead friends and all the people who went through what I did. No one must die anymore because of lax construction. An earthquake is a natural event, we cannot prevent it or predict it, we can just prepare. There needs to be an effort by all the institutions to fix this," Antignani said.

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Decaying schools are a well-known but neglected problem in Italy. The most recent Pisa school assessment released in December by the OECD noted that all schools in Italy suffer from poor physical infrastructure.

A survey of 5,300 school buildings across the country showed just 9.0 percent were built to withstand earthquakes and 60 percent did not have a fire safety certificate, according to environment group Legambiente.

Despite a striking need for works on school buildings, the survey noted a steep drop in spending on repairs between 2009 and 2012 as spending cuts hit during the economic downturn in those years. Of the schools in the Abruzzo region where L'Aquila is located, 94.5 percent were reported to need extraordinary structural repairs.

The new Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, whose wife is a teacher, has vowed to address the issue by spending billions on improving school buildings, and last month invited mayors from across Italy to write to him personally to tell him what works need to be done.

So far, 60 percent of a 150 million euro fund for school buildings launched by the previous government in November 2013 has been assigned. The funds must be used before the end of April, when they expire.

According to the education minister when the bill was passed, Maria Chiara Carrozza, building works are hampered by excess bureaucracy in awarding contracts and a lack of clarity on which layer of government is responsible.

Cinzia Caggiano, who has campaigned for safer schools since her experiencing tragedy in 2008, urged Renzi to follow through with his plan after what she described as years of inaction by successive governments.

"Five years ago my son died at school. The ceiling fell down. He never came home any more," Caggiano told Reuters. "This is a step towards something concrete. I hope."

(Reporting by Naomi O'Leary)