

Italy earthquake toll rises to 73, three towns reduced to rubble

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Amatrice: A strong earthquake in central Italy has killed at least 73 people and injuring hundreds more as reports were coming in that three worst affected towns have been reduced to rubble.

The magnitude 6 quake struck at 3:36 a.m. (0136 GMT) and was felt across a broad swath of central Italy, including Rome, where residents woke to a long swaying followed by aftershocks. The temblor shook the Lazio region and Umbria and Le Marche on the Adriatic coast.

Amatrice and Accumuli, two small towns in Rieti province, were among the hardest hit, local media reported. Amatrice mayor Sergio Pirozzi told local media that most of the town was gone.

Rescue teams and citizens set to work early in the morning, digging to find survivors as voices of trapped people could be heard under the rubble, Ansa news agency reported.

Italy's Civil Protection Agency described the earthquake as "severe".

Civil Protection chief Fabrizio Curcio told a press conference in Rome early Wednesday that the earthquake could be compared to the strong earthquake that hit the city of L'Aquila in 2009, leaving more than 300 people dead and thousands displaced.

The national emergency fund has allocated 234 million euros as immediate aid to earthquake-stricken towns and villages in central Italy, according to the economy ministry.

The toll was likely to rise as crews reached homes in more remote hamlets where the scenes were apocalyptic "like Dante's Inferno," according to one witness. Complicating matters was that the area is a popular vacation spot in summer, with populations swelling, making the number of people in the area at the time difficult to estimate.

"The town isn't here anymore," said Sergio Pirozzi, the mayor of Amatrice. "I believe the toll will rise."

Premier Matteo Renzi planned to head to the zone later Wednesday and promised the area, which has suffered quakes many times before: "No family, no city, no hamlet will be left behind."

The hardest-hit towns were the tiny towns of Amatrice and Accumoli near Rieti, some 100 kilometers (80 miles) northeast of Rome, and Pescara del Tronto some 25 kilometers further east. Italy's civil protection agency, which was coordinating the rescue, said the provisional toll was 73 dead, several hundred injured and thousands in need of temporary housing, though it stressed the numbers were fluid.

The center of Amatrice was devastated, with entire blocks of buildings razed and the air thick with dust and smelling strongly of gas. Amatrice, birthplace of the famed spaghetti all'amatriciana bacon-tomato pasta sauce, is made up of 69

hamlets that rescue teams were working to reach.

Rocks and metal tumbled onto the streets of the city center and dazed residents huddled in piazzas as more than 40 aftershocks jolted the region into the early morning hours, some as strong as 5.1.

As the August sun bared down, residents, civil protection workers and even priests dug with shovels, bulldozers and their bare hands to reach survivors. Dozens were pulled out alive: There was relief as a woman emerged on a stretcher from one building, followed by a dog.

"We need chain saws, shears to cut iron bars, and jacks to remove beams: everything, we need everything," civil protection worker Andrea Gentili told The Associated Press. Italy's national blood drive association appealed for donations to Rieti's hospital.

But just a few kilometers to the north, in Illica, the response was slower as residents anxiously waited for loved ones to be extracted from the rubble.

The devastation harked back to the 2009 quake that killed more than 300 people in and around L'Aquila, about 90 kilometers (55 miles) south of the latest quake. The town, which still hasn't bounced back fully, sent emergency teams Wednesday to help with the rescue.

Another hard-hit town was Pescara del Tronto, in the Le Marche region, where the main road was covered in debris.

Residents were digging their neighbors out by hand since emergency crews hadn't yet arrived in force. Photos taken from the air by regional firefighters showed the town essentially flattened; Italy requested EU satellite images of the whole area to get the scope of the damage.

The Italian geological service put the magnitude at 6.0; the U.S. Geological Survey reported 6.2 with the epicenter at Norcia, about 170 kilometers (105 miles) northeast of Rome, and with a relatively shallow depth of 10 kilometers (6 miles).

"Quakes with this magnitude at this depth in our territory in general create building collapses, which can result in deaths," said the head of Italy's civil protection service, Fabrizio Curcio. He added that the region is popular with tourists escaping the heat of Rome, with more residents than at other times of the year, and that a single building collapse could raise the toll significantly.

The mayor of Accumoli, Stefano Petrucci, said a family of four had died there, one of the few young families who had decided to stay in the area. He wept as he noted that the tiny hamlet of 700 swells to 2,000 in the summer months, and that he feared for the future of the town.

"I hope they don't forget us," he told Sky TG24.

In Amatrice, the Rev. Fabio Gammarota, priest of a nearby parish, said he had blessed seven bodies extracted so far. "One was a friend of mine," he said.

A 1997 quake killed a dozen people in central Italy and severely damaged one of the jewels of Umbria, the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, filled with Giotto frescoes. The Franciscan friars who are the custodians of the basilica reported no immediate damage from Wednesday's temblor.

Pope Francis skipped his traditional catechism for his Wednesday general audience and instead invited pilgrims in St. Peter's Square to recite the rosary with him.

- (With AP inputs)