

Stricken Abruzzo teaches Italy a valuable lesson

By Dr. Francesco Nicotra



This “Note from Italy” could only be about the April earthquake in Abruzzo, which resulted in almost 300 deaths, thousands of people injured and homeless — not to mention the immeasurable damage to its capital, L’Aquila. Historic buildings have crumbled. Centuries-old art is now, for the most part, reduced

to or buried beneath rubble. It is a tragedy that has shaken Italians to their very core, but has produced a wave of solidarity in helping those who have survived, proving yet again that the very best Italian qualities rise to the occasion when tragedy strikes.

As if by magic, the disaster has put an end to the endless bickering between the government and opposition, and a huge organizational machine has swung into action to help the victims of this latest earthquake. In addition to the civil defense, fire and police forces, thousands of volunteers immediately headed for Abruzzo from all corners of Italy and the globe. The National Italian American Foundation was quick to declare its solidarity with Abruzzo, a region to which many Italian Americans can trace their roots, and the Foundation is now leading recovery efforts from the United States.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has promised that in two years a new L’Aquila will be built in accordance with modern anti-seismic standards and that every effort will be made to recover and restore the city’s artistic heritage. Other parts of the province of L’Aquila also hit by the earthquake have received the same assurances.

Abruzzo is a mountainous and wooded region bordered to the east by the Adriatic Sea. “Strong and kind” is how Gabriele D’Annunzio, the region’s most famous poet, who is also one of Italy’s greatest poets and writers, described its people and Abruzzo is also featured in Ernest Hemingway’s famous novel, “A Farewell to Arms.” Pride and dignity are other characteristics always associated with the people of Abruzzo and the earthquake has showcased all these qualities and more besides. The “Abruzzesi” are typical mountain folk, used to sacrifice and battling against nature. There can be absolutely no doubt that with help from the state, they will be well up to the task that lies ahead.

But this catastrophe in Abruzzo has also raised the spectre of other important safety issues in this, a country that faces ongoing risks of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and landslides. To be precise, two thirds of Italy’s inhabited areas face such dangers all the time; it does not seem as if regional and municipi-

pal governments have been as proactive enough regarding preventative measures such as building standards. ISPRA (the National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research) has recently finalized a report likely to cause many a sleepless night.

It says, for example, that “today, 5,596, or 69 percent of Italy’s towns are at risk of landslides” with some 2,839 towns classified as being at “great risk.” It states that landslides are the most frequent natural calamity of all and that “after earthquakes, they incur the greatest number of victims as well as the greatest damage to residential areas, infrastructures and the country’s natural, historic and cultural heritage.”

The document — now part of the public record — basically says that one tenth of the country “is classified as being at high risk of floods, landslides and avalanches” and that this “unequivocally fragile situation” is aggravated by the fact that more than two thirds of the areas at risk involve urban centers, infrastructures and industrial areas connected to the country’s social and economic development. A curse inflicted by an adversarial Mother Nature? Not at all: “amongst the causes of hydro-geological instability,” man’s foolishly conceived interference with the natural lay of the land is becoming an increasingly serious problem.

The ISPRA report, which reads like a heavy indictment against those who have failed to create anti-seismic building standards, states that, “Italy is one of the most at-risk countries in Europe.” The areas most vulnerable to earthquakes are Friuli, the central and southern sections of the Apennines and southeast Sicily.

As if that were not enough, the report also states that, “Italy is one of the countries most at risk of dangerous volcanic activity” and makes particular mention of the areas around Mt. Vesuvius and the Phlegrean Fields, Ischia, Mt. Etna, the Eolian Islands and, just a few kilometers from Rome, the Alban Hills. Thousands of houses have been built on the slopes of Vesuvius over the years, despite decades of warnings from scientists that it is only a question of time until the volcano that symbolizes Naples erupts, an event that has the potential to be the greatest disaster of all. Even so, the state’s evacuation plan, which would enable those who live in the shadows of Vesuvius to reach safety, would take some 12 days to achieve.

Little wonder then that a truly vast number of people are now, thankfully, calling for public administrators to seek out and make use of the genius that is certainly available in Italy to ensure that future catastrophes are prevented, instead of just sitting around waiting for death and destruction to bring out the best of this country of ours. ▲