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Mudslides and Flooding Ravage Areas of Scenic Beauty in Italy



Luca Zennaro/European Pressphoto Agency

Damage on Wednesday in Brugnato, in Italy's Liguria region. Flooding began in the area on Tuesday night and, along with mudslides, left at least six people dead.

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO Published: October 26, 2011

ROME — Flailing through mounds of sludge left by torrential rains, rescue workers cleared debris and hunted for survivors in Tuscany and Liguria on Wednesday after mudslides and flooding left at least six people dead and hundreds homeless in those areas, among the most picturesque in Italy.

Video images showed vast devastation, including in Monterosso al Mare, a village on the Unesco World Heritage List.

In some towns, videos showed, streets had become canals, furniture was piled pell-mell outside homes, bridges were swept away, highways were blocked by tree trunks and overturned trucks, cars were washed out to sea and boats were shredded like matchsticks.

Telecommunications and electricity were severed in the worst-hit towns, while train service was disrupted and numerous roads and highways were closed, civil protection authorities said.

In Monterosso al Mare, one of the five medieval towns that make up the picturesque Cinque Terre, a popular tourist draw on the Italian Riviera, one video showed a muddy river sweeping through a street, the water lapping at the ground floors of the buildings.

Angelo Betta, the mayor of Monterosso, said the rains had come fast and hard starting Tuesday night, causing five canals to overflow at the same time. "We need food, water, doctors, even toilets," he told Italian television.

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People made their way through a mud-covered street in Monterosso, Italy, on Wednesday.

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The affected area is popular with Italian Riviera tourists.

Interviewed by the news media, residents of Monterosso, which is popular with hikers who trek from town to town along a 12-mile footpath offering breath-catching views, described apocalyptic scenes of scrambling to reach upper stories while water swirled into the town like a speeding train.

The rains extended into Wednesday, causing more destruction. The Italian Army was sent in to assist civil protection rescue workers, and President Giorgio Napolitano said on television that [climate change](#) was the cause of the disaster.

“This is the very painful price we are unfortunately paying,” he said.

Environmental groups also blamed unregulated construction and expressed concerns that government cutbacks to environmental protection agencies, a consequence of Italy’s budget and economic travails, had undermined efforts to better manage such catastrophes.

Vittorio Cogliati Dezza, president of Legambiente, an Italian environmental organization, called on the government to restore financing to the Environment Ministry. He said preventive measures to strengthen geologically fragile areas were more economically sound than tackling emergencies, “which result in unsustainable costs for the population with no effective savings for public coffers.”

The torrential rains were likely to become more common because of climate change, said Fausto Guzzetti, the director of a geological institute that is part of Italy’s National Research Council. A different issue, he said in an interview, was the impact that they had on infrastructure and towns, as a result of the often unregulated and widespread urban development that took place throughout Italy during the postwar boom. What happened in Tuscany and Liguria, he said, “should not have happened, but it did because we have built in places where we should not have built. Now it is too late, and we are paying the consequences.”

Speaking from Aulla, in the province of Massa Carrara, one of the worst-hit towns where two people died, Enrico Rossi, the president of the Tuscany region, said in an interview on Italian television that future construction would be blocked in the areas afflicted by the flooding and mudslides.

“We must also examine what was done in the past and whether procedures were followed to the law,” he said. “It’s easy to say now that construction was done wrong and now we have a severe problem,” Mr. Guzzetti said. “Unfortunately, because of the current economy we don’t have the resources to fix it in the short term, which makes it even worse.”

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