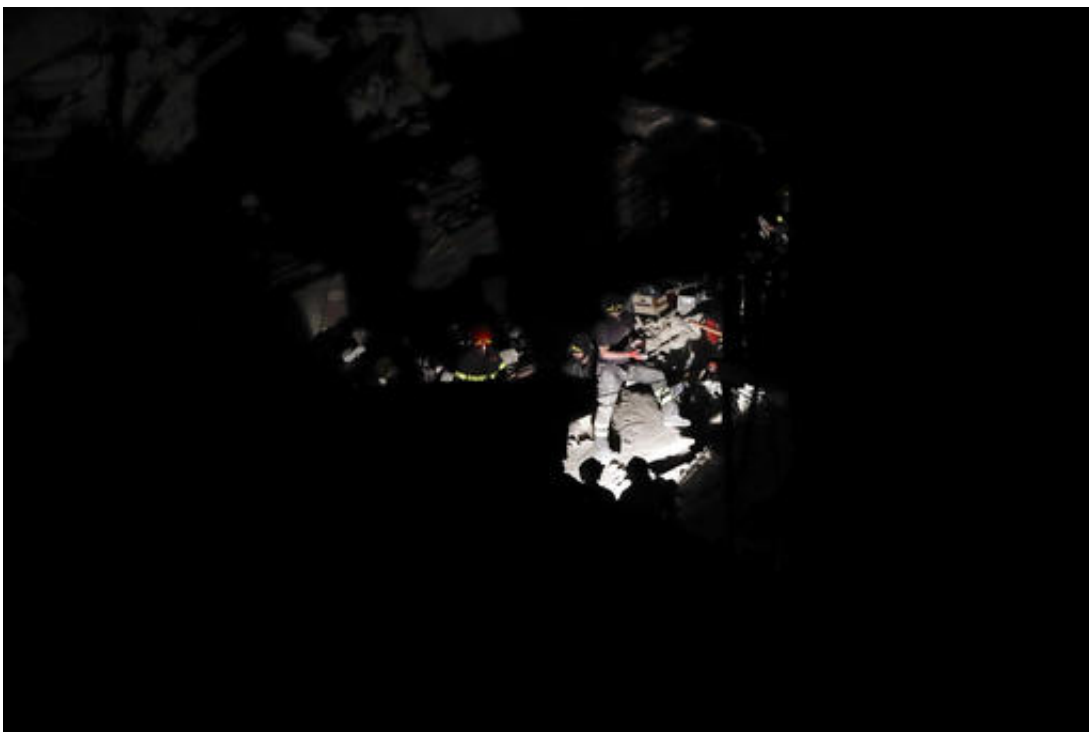


Rescuers search for survivors in Italy quake that killed 247

August 25 2016, by Paolo Santalucia, Frances D'emilio And Nicole Winfield



Rescuers search amid the rubble following an earthquake in Pescara Del Tronto, Italy, Thursday, Aug. 25, 2016. A strong earthquake struck on Wednesday and was felt across a broad swath of central Italy, including Rome, where residents woke to a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

Rescue crews using bulldozers and their bare hands raced to dig out survivors Thursday from a strong earthquake that reduced three central

Italian towns to rubble. The death toll rose to 247, but the number of dead and missing was uncertain given the thousands of vacationers in the area for summer's final days.

Residents wakened before dawn by the temblor emerged from their crumbled homes to find what they described as apocalyptic scenes "like Dante's Inferno," with entire blocks of buildings turned into piles of sand and rock, thick dust choking the air and a putrid smell of gas.

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

The magnitude 6.2 quake struck at 3:36 a.m. on Wednesday 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, a highly seismic area that has witnessed major quakes in the past and continued to shake early Thursday with aftershocks.

Dozens of people were pulled out alive by rescue teams and volunteers that poured in from around Italy.

In the evening, about 17 hours after the quake struck, firefighters pulled a 10-year-old girl alive from the rubble in Pescara del Tronto.



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"You can hear something under here. Quiet, quiet," one rescue worker said, before soon urging her on: "Come on, Giulia, come on, Giulia."

Cheers broke out when she was pulled out.

And there were wails when bodies emerged.

"Unfortunately, 90 percent we pull out are dead, but some make it, that's why we are here," said Christian Bianchetti, a volunteer from Rieti who was working in devastated Amatrice where flood lights were set up so the rescue could continue through the night.

Premier Matteo Renzi visited the zone Wednesday, greeted rescue teams and survivors, and pledged that "No family, no city, no hamlet will be left behind." Italy's [civil protection](#) agency reported the [death toll](#) had risen to 247 early Thursday; at least 368 others were injured.



Violeta Bratu, helper of 97-year-old Antonio Putini, sleeping at right with his dog, poses for a photo in a temporary shelter set up in a gymnasium in Amatrice, central Italy, Thursday, Aug. 25, 2016, where a 6.1 earthquake struck just after 3:30 a.m., Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. The quake was felt across a broad section of central Italy, including the capital Rome where people in homes in the historic center felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

Worst affected were the tiny towns of Amatrice and Accumoli near Rieti, 100 kilometers (60 miles) northeast of Rome, and Pescara del Tronto, 25 kilometers further east. Italy's civil protection agency set up

tent cities around each hamlet to accommodate the thousands of homeless. In Amatrice, the elderly and children spent the night inside a local sports facility.

Italy's health minister, Beatrice Lorenzin, visiting the devastated area, said many of the victims were children: The quake zone is a popular spot for Romans with second homes, and the population swells in August when most Italians take their summer holiday before school resumes.

The medieval center of Amatrice was devastated, with rescue crews digging by hand to get to trapped residents.

The birthplace of the famed spaghetti all' amatriciana bacon and tomato sauce, the city was full for this weekend's planned festival honoring its native dish. Guests filled its top Hotel Roma, famed for its amatriciana, where five bodies were pulled from the rubble before the operation was suspended when conditions became too dangerous late Wednesday. Among those killed was an 11-year-old boy who had initially shown signs of life.

Officials initially said about 70 guests were staying at the hotel, but later lowered the number to about 35, many of whom got out in time.



Rescuers search through debris following an earthquake in Pescara Del Tronto, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

Carlo Cardinali, a local fire official taking part in the search efforts at the hotel, told Sky TG24 that about 10 guests were still missing.

Amatrice is made up of 69 hamlets that teams from around Italy were working to reach with sniffer dogs, earth movers and other heavy equipment. In the city center, rocks and metal tumbled onto the streets and dazed residents huddled in piazzas as more than 200 aftershocks jolted the region throughout the day, some as strong as magnitude 5.1.

"The whole ceiling fell but did not hit me," marveled resident Maria

Gianni. "I just managed to put a pillow on my head and I wasn't hit, luckily, just slightly injured my leg."

Another woman, sitting in front of her destroyed home with a blanket over her shoulders, said she didn't know what had become of her loved ones.

"It was one of the most beautiful towns of Italy and now there's nothing left," she said, too distraught to give her name. "I don't know what we'll do."



An injured man is carried on a stretcher by rescuers following an earthquake in Accumoli, central Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. The temblor shook the Lazio region and Umbria and Le Marche on the Adriatic coast. (Angelo Carconi/ANSA via AP)

Residents, civil protection workers and even priests dug with shovels, bulldozers and their bare hands to reach survivors. A steady column of dump trucks brought tons of twisted metal, rock and cement down the hill and onto the highway toward Rome, along with a handful of ambulances bringing the injured to Rome hospitals.

Italy's national blood drive association appealed for donations to Rieti's hospital.

Despite a massive rescue and relief effort—with army, Alpine crews, carabinieri, firefighters, Red Cross crews and volunteers, it wasn't enough: A few miles (kilometers) north of Amatrice, in Illica, residents complained that rescue workers were slow to arrive and that loved ones were trapped.

"We are waiting for the military," said resident Alessandra Cappellanti. "There is a base in Ascoli, one in Rieti, and in L'Aquila. And we have not seen a single soldier. We pay! It's disgusting!"

Agostino Severo, a Rome resident visiting Illica, said workers eventually arrived after an hour or so. "We came out to the piazza, and it looked like Dante's Inferno," he said. "People crying for help, help."



Rescuers search through debris following an earthquake in Pescara Del Tronto, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

The U.S. Geological Survey reported the quake's magnitude was 6.2, while the Italian geological service put it at 6 and the European Mediterranean Seismological Center at 6.1. The quake had a shallow depth of between four and 10 kilometers, the agencies said. Generally, shallow earthquakes pack a bigger punch and tend to be more damaging than deeper quakes.

"The Apennine mountains in central Italy have the highest seismic hazard in Western Europe and earthquakes of this magnitude are common," noted Richard Walters, a lecturer in Earth sciences at Durham University in Britain.

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 fully recovered, sent emergency teams Wednesday to help with the rescue and set up tent camps for residents unwilling to stay indoors because of aftershocks.

"I don't know what to say. We are living this immense tragedy," said a tearful Rev. Savino D'Amelio, a parish priest in Amatrice. "We are only hoping there will be the least number of victims possible and that we all have the courage to move on."

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



Aerial view of Amatrice in central Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016, as it appears after a 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 of the

capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

Residents were digging their neighbors out by hand before emergency crews arrived. Aerial photos taken by regional firefighters showed the town essentially flattened and under a thick gray coat of dust; Italy requested EU satellite images of the whole area to get the scope of the damage.

"There are broken liquor bottles all over the place," said Gino Petrucci, owner of a bar in nearby Arquata Del Tronto where he was beginning the long cleanup.

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.

President Barack Obama, speaking by telephone to Italian President Sergio Mattarella, said the U.S. sent its thoughts and prayers to the quake victims and saluted the "quick action" by first responders, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said.



This aerial photo shows the historical part of the town of Amatrice, central Italy, after an earthquake, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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 the thousands of pilgrims in St. Peter's Square to recite the rosary with him. He also sent a six-man squad from the Vatican's fire department to help with the rescue.



A rescued woman is carried away on a stretcher following an earthquake in Amatrice Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (Massimo Percossi/ANSA via AP)



A man cries as another injured is helped in Amatrice, central Italy, where a 6.1 earthquake struck just after 3:30 a.m., Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. The quake was felt across a broad section of central Italy, including the capital Rome where people in homes in the historic center felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (Massimo Percossi/ANSA via AP)



A man is rescued from the rubble of a building after an earthquake, in Accumoli, central Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. A devastating earthquake rocked central Italy early Wednesday, collapsing homes on top of residents as they slept. At least 23 people were reported dead in three hard-hit towns where rescue crews raced to dig survivors out of the rubble, but the toll was expected to rise as crews reached homes in more remote hamlets. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)



The body of a victim is pulled out of the rubble following an earthquake in Amatrice Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. . (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



A man is pulled out of the rubble following an earthquake in Amatrice Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (Massimo Percossi/ANSA via AP)



The side of a building is collapsed following an earthquake, in Amatrice Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (Massimo Percossi/ANSA via AP)



A nun checks her mobile phone as she lies near a victim laid on a ladder following an earthquake in Amatrice Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. 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 of the capital felt a long swaying followed by aftershocks. (Massimo Percossi/ANSA via AP)



A man leans on rubble following an earthquake in Amatrice Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016. A strong earthquake in central Italy reduced three towns to rubble as people slept early Wednesday, with reports that as many as 50 people were killed and hundreds injured as rescue crews raced to dig out survivors. (Massimo Percossi/ANSA via AP)

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