

'Like a waterfall': deadly Italian storms spark climate debate

September 16 2022, by Ella IDE with Alice RITCHIE in Rome



More than 400 millimetres (16 inches) of rain fell over a few hours on Thursday evening.

At least 10 people died and four were missing after an extraordinary thunderstorm sparked major flooding in central Italy, officials said

Friday, pushing the issue of climate change up the agenda the week before elections.

Prime Minister Mario Draghi confirmed the toll, while saying it could change, before heading to the town of Ostra near Ancona, one of the places worst hit. More than 400 millimetres (16 inches) of rain fell there over a few hours on Thursday evening.

"It was scary because it happened so fast," said Laura Marinelli, 33, who grabbed her 18-month-old daughter and ran to neighbours upstairs as her ground-floor home near Ostra began to flood.

"It sounded like a waterfall," she added.

The waters kept rising and they climbed onto the roof to call for help, where they were rescued by emergency services.

"We've lost everything, all the photos, all the letters you can't replace," she told AFP, plastic pink toys floating in the submerged garden nearby.

News reports suggested there were two children among the missing, one swept by the waters out of the arms of their mother.

Emergency funds

Across the area around Ancona, the port capital of the central eastern Marche region, streets were turned into rivers, cars swept into piles by the floodwaters, furniture washed out of homes and thick mud left everywhere.

The fire service said it had more than 300 people working on the floods, while several areas were without electricity or telephone connections, and schools were closed.



Many people -- including Prime Minister Mario Draghi -- have linked the flooding with changes to weather sparked by climate change.

Draghi announced five million euros in emergency funds for the area and visited Ostra to offer his condolences in person.

"We will do everything possible... you can count on us," said the premier, who is set to leave office following elections on September 25.

Speaking in Rome earlier, he put the toll at 10 dead and four missing, while saying this number was liable to change.

Draghi also made an explicit link between the flooding and global

warming, saying: "We see it concretely in what happened today how the fight against climate change is fundamental."

Condolences for those affected poured in from across the political spectrum.

Giorgia Meloni, whose far-right Brothers of Italy party is leading opinion polls, offered her "full solidarity" with those affected.

No warning

Italy has been hit by severe drought, followed by violent end-of-summer storms, and many have drawn the link with climate change—a subject which took a back seat during the election campaign.

"How can you think that the fight against climate change is not the first priority?" said Enrico Letta, head of the centre-left Democratic Party.

He said he was "stunned and speechless" at news of the floods and announced he was suspending campaigning in the Marche region.



The deadly floods took place just days before September 25 elections, in which the far-right is tipped to win power.

Francesco Rocca, president of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said its teams were on their way.

"Very concerned by the growth of extreme weather events," he said on Twitter.

This summer's drought, the worst in 70 years, drained the Po River, Italy's largest water reservoir.

The baking heat has in recent weeks been followed by storms, the water flooding land rendered hard as concrete.

In July, 11 people were killed when a section of Italy's biggest Alpine glacier gave way, a disaster that officials blamed on climate change.

The EU's economy commissioner, Paolo Gentiloni, a former Italian premier, said he shed tears for the victims of the floods in Marche.

"Italy and Europe must take climate change seriously," he tweeted.

Local officials said there was no warning of the huge storm, with only a normal weather warning issued.

The Italian Air Force, which deals with weather, said there had been an "exceptional" event, with more than 400 mm of rain falling between mid-afternoon and 11:00 pm.

More than half of this fell within four hours, spokesman Guido Guidi told AFP, adding: "It was not a foreseeable event."

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