

PROTECT ITALY'S FRAGILE TOWNS

There are obvious steps to be taken, but the obstacles include corruption, bureaucracy and a lack of dedicated funds.

Italy sits astride a convergence of major and minor fault lines that makes it one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world. When a deadly temblor hits — as one did on Wednesday — the country's emergency response systems kick into gear, helping to rescue the injured and sustain survivors.

But while Italy does a good job of rescuing people after earthquakes, it has done a terrible job of protecting people and buildings ahead of time. It also has fallen short when the emergency crews leave and it is time to rebuild towns.

In 2009, an earthquake killed nearly 300 people and destroyed thousands of buildings in and around the town of L'Aquila, including a new hospital wing presumably built to meet the latest earthquake standards. Seven years and billions of euros later, the center of L'Aquila remains under construction, and many people are still waiting to move into permanent homes.

One estimate, by Armando Zambrano, the head of Italy's National Council of Engineers, puts the cost of strengthening the country's historic structures at about 93 billion euros (\$105 billion). Along with the lack of available funding, the country's corruption, illegal construction and a cumbersome bureaucracy all work to prevent obvious steps from being taken, like reinforcing existing buildings and ensuring that new buildings meet earthquake standards.

In the town of Amatrice, centuries-old stone buildings crumbled under the force of Wednesday's quake. But the town's school, built in 2012, was also badly damaged. As Italians grieve for the nearly 300 people killed last week, many are also angry.

The government of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has responded to the latest earthquake by declaring a state of emergency and offering tax relief to people in the affected areas. On Thursday, Mr. Renzi vowed that "rebuilding these hill towns is a priority for this government and the country." He also promised a new program, to be called Casa Italia, to start dealing with the problem of shoddy construction and to make sure that Italian homes meet earthquake standards.

Mr. Renzi is under added pressure to make good on his commitment. He has staked his government on a controversial constitutional reform referendum scheduled in November, and he has said he will resign if the referendum is defeated.

The result of that vote may now well depend on whether he succeeds where so many of his predecessors have failed: delivering on promises to rebuild what has been lost and to reform Italy's earthquake-preparedness programs, keeping people and the country's priceless architectural and artistic heritage as safe as possible from the next earthquake.

