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PRESS RELEASE

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Why do people die in earthquakes? Buildings are the main killers

Geneva- The 6.3-magnitude quake that struck Italy early this morning is confirmation, once again that Europe is not immune from powerful earthquakes. The intensity of the Italian earthquake was 6.3 on the Richter scale comparable to the May 2006 earthquake in Indonesia island of Java, which killed more than 5000 people in the city of Yogyakarta.

Around 25 major earthquakes have struck Italy in the past 40 years, some with a magnitude of 6.9, killing a total of more than 5000 people (CRED) and injuring tens of thousands more.

Annually, more than 100 million people are exposed to earthquakes worldwide according to a new UNISDR report that will be launched in Bahrain in May 2009. Italy, Romania and Greece are among the most disaster-prone European countries with almost 3.5 million people at risk from earthquakes. Turkey is another very exposed country in the European continent with more than two million people vulnerable to seismic shocks.

This morning's tragedy in Aquila, 95km (60 miles) north-east of Rome, stems from a known fault line stretching between the central Apennines, a mountain belt that runs from the Gulf of Taranto in the south to the southern edge of the Po basin in northern Italy.

Essentially – and as is well established from countless previous tremblers – buildings are the main killers when earthquakes strike which is why constructing resilient buildings in earthquake prone zones is vital. In Aquila, according to early reports, around 10,000 buildings are destroyed or damaged by today's earthquake principally in the medieval city as many old structures did not meet modern seismic standards.

“Retrofitting old buildings is a very costly process,” says Helena Molin-Valdes, Deputy Director, UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. “But all new public buildings such as schools, hospitals, and factories are critical infrastructures that should be built according to seismic standards in all areas known to be susceptible to earthquakes. It is reckless not to do so, particularly for any new construction in identified seismic zones.”

Applying earthquake resistant features to new buildings can add, on average, less than five per cent more to the costs, whereas retrofitting existing structures can be around three times more.

In Italy economic losses due to earthquakes amount to nearly 21 billion € over the past 40 years – an average of 500 million € per year (CRED). These figures only include direct damage and are probably on the conservative side.

“The cost of investing in structural resilience and proper site selection from the start is minimal compared to the necessary reconstruction when earthquakes have happened – not to mention the devastation of human life cut short,” adds Molin-Valdes. “Investment in disaster risk reduction is a must if we want to save more lives and more dollars – and diminish long term disruption – as more people are now living in cities prone to earthquakes.”

The second session of the Global Platform on disaster risk reduction that will be held in Geneva in June 16-19 will further discuss the urgency to invest more in building resilience and urge governments to prioritize investment in disaster risk reduction.

Notes to Editors

CRED is the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED)

Internet: <http://www.cred.be>