

## **WORLD**

# **Italians Are Losing Faith in Berlusconi**

**Willem Marx, Contributor**

**L'AQUILA, ITALY (Oct. 10, 2009)** -- Silvio Berlusconi got a brief respite from his ongoing legal woes Friday when a Mafia boss testified that he had no ties to the Italian prime minister. But the pressure on the man known as "Il Cavaliere" is growing by the day.

Tens of thousands of protesters marched through Rome last weekend demanding Berlusconi's resignation. Looming corruption trials, a messy divorce and rancor within his right-wing coalition have pushed his approval rating to 45 percent, the lowest ever.

Now even Berlusconi's proudest accomplishment this year looks tarnished: the rapid and well-resourced emergency response to the earthquake that rocked the central Italian city of L'Aquila in April. He showcased that effort by bringing world leaders to the ruined medieval town for the G8 in July. And for his 73rd birthday Sept. 29, he arranged for television cameras to be on hand when he proclaimed the construction of 400 new apartments to be "a miracle." "We have shown that the state is present," he said, "that the state is a friend ... that leaves no one behind."

Many ordinary citizens of L'Aquila strongly disagree. Ivano Marianni, 30, who only recently moved into one of the new apartments after living in a tent for six months, is one of scores of residents who blame Berlusconi personally for doing nothing to rebuild their homes. "I don't think he's behaved very well," he says. "He's arrived with heavy-handedness and evicted people without any payments."

About 100,000 people were forced from their homes by the April 6 earthquake, which measured 5.8 on the Richter scale. The city center was largely destroyed and has been cordoned off by the military ever since. Some local residents were moved into distant hotels or placed into shared accommodation, but 36,000 of them ended up in government-issued tents.

The Italian Civil Protection Agency -- the equivalent to the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency -- hopes to finish construction on more than 180 apartment buildings in L'Aquila by January, at a cost of more than \$1.1 billion. But local residents like Marianni claim they're already fed up with the

new buildings' cheap construction materials and say they would rather the money was spent on rebuilding their original homes.

Marianni, for instance, needs government funds to restore his 600-year-old family home, which has collapsed rooms and lacks large portions of the roof. But Guido Bertolaso, Berlusconi's point man in L'Aquila and the head of the Civil Protection Agency, says the government's system for subsidizing personal rebuilding is still "in process" -- and that some residents may have to wait as long as 10 years.

Despite Berlusconi's promises, local architect Antonio Perrotti says the main barrier to people returning to their homes is government red tape. He claims that of the 3,000 personal applications submitted for government reconstruction subsidies, fewer than 100 have so far been approved.

Perrotti, who with his son is among the roughly 1,000 people still living in government tents seven months after the earthquake, says there's been "no involvement of the inhabitants" in the decision to invest so much federal funding in the new buildings. He claims the government's decisions are not "liable to controls by public finance," and he says the Civil Protection Agency's tendering process lacks transparency and accountability. Indeed, some local magistrates have reportedly excluded more than a dozen subcontractors from the housing projects because of alleged ties to organized crime.

Critics like Perrotti say they fear that once federal government agencies leave the region, local government will be saddled with high costs to maintain the new buildings complexes. "Berlusconi has built the houses, now he will probably go, and these houses will require roads, kindergartens and services," Perrotti says, "and this will all come down to us, the citizens, and we will have to do it with ordinary taxes."

Marianni, already living under protest in his government-built apartment, has a more personal concern. "My fear is that they'll put us over there and they'll forget us," he says from his ruined home, as he gestures toward the new housing complexes sited far outside the city. "This is my house. I want to come back here. I'm hoping that Berlusconi will do something." But the prime minister may well have other things on his mind.