

## Mobsters 'out to make a killing from the quake'

Acclaimed writer who exposed Naples mafia warns organised crime gangs will target rebuilding contracts

By Peter Popham in Rome

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Roberto Saviano, the best-selling author of Gomorrah, says the flood of aid money pouring into the earthquake-hit Abruzzo region risks making the area a prime target for organised crime.

Mr Saviano, whose non-fiction book has sold more than 1.8 million copies and has been translated into 43 languages, issued the warning in La Repubblica newspaper yesterday after touring the devastated zones. He has lived in hiding under police protection since bosses of the Camorra, the Naples mafia, threatened to kill him for "insulting" them and revealing secrets of their operations in his book, which has also been made into a powerful film.

Saviano recalled how the disastrous earthquake in Irpinia, near Naples, in 1980 – which killed 2,735 people and made 230,000 homeless – turned into a vast business opportunity for organised crime. "What is a tragedy for this population," he wrote, "for someone else can become an opportunity, a bottomless mine, a paradise of profit."

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Although it is close to the southern parts of Italy where the power of the Mob is strongest, Mr Saviano says that Abruzzo has been relatively ignored to date by the mafias of Campania and Calabria because "it lacked the possibility of doing big business". But the gangsters, he reports, are not far away. Eighty senior Mafia gangsters are incarcerated in the L'Aquila jail, or rather they were, until the Interior Minister ordered their urgent transfer in case the prison should collapse in an aftershock.

Senior mafiosi still at liberty have in recent years met in Abruzzo to hatch their plots. An important narcotics smuggler called Diego Leon Montoya Sanchez, one of the FBI's 10 most wanted criminals, has a base in Abruzzo



AP

*Aman looks at the ruins of a house in Sant'Eusanio Forconese, near L'Aquila, yesterday*

while others have found its wild and thinly-populated mountains ideal country for evading arrest. Its national parkland has also offered ideal dumping grounds for the traffickers in dangerous waste who play a key part in the Camorra gang world in Naples.

But all of this, Saviano warns, could be a mere appetiser compared to the feast of corruption and infiltration that the billions of reconstruction money may provoke. What happened after the Irpinia earthquake stands as an awful warning. About 55 billion lira in aid poured into the region but 10 years later, one in three earthquake victims was still living in a pre-fab. Only a fraction of the money reached the victims while building contractors, local politicians and the Camorra prospered.

The rescue effort in Abruzzo has been infinitely quicker and slicker than that in Irpinia, where the first army teams arrived without the right equipment almost 24 hours after the quake struck.

Spearheaded by the Civil Protection Force, which was created as a result of the failures in Irpinia, the Abruzzo blitz accommodated the tens of thousands of homeless in tents and fed and cared for them at lightning speed.

But Saviano warns that, just as at Irpinia, there is an army of construction professionals waiting for the opportunity to dive into the re-building trough.

"Designers, surveyors, engineers and architects are on the point of invading Abruzzo, thanks to an instrument that appears innocuous but which is the starting gun for the invasion of cement: the form declaring damage incurred by the houses. In the coming days, the forms will be distributed to the municipal technical offices of all the districts of Abruzzo. Hundreds of forms for thousands of inspections. Whoever has that piece of paper in hand will have the certainty of receiving excellent remuneration, fed by an incredible system."

At Irpinia, the corruption came about because it was often the same official who approved the reconstruction payment and who was directly involved in the reconstruction itself. The huge sums pouring into the region also led to more and more towns claiming to have been damaged by the quake – the number jumped from 143 to 690. The net result was that many of the truly needy remained uncompensated, the pushy and unscrupulous grew fat, and the Camorra made hay.

How to avoid those mistakes in Abruzzo? "The only thing to do," Saviano says, "is to create a commission with the power to monitor reconstruction. Because the risks of criminal infiltration are enormous... The only real homage we can pay to those who have died in this earthquake is not to allow speculation to win as it has in the past."

### Highlights from Saviano's article

"The people of Abruzzo have been saved by an unstinting effort which belies every commonplace about the Italians being lazy or indifferent to suffering.

"But the price that this region will have to pay could be very high... The terror of what happened at Irpinia nearly 30 years ago, the waste, the corruption, the political and criminal monopoly of the reconstruction [risks being repeated]... The risk of reconstruction is precisely this: the appraisals of damage increase, the money increases, the contracts generate sub-contracts and the cycle of cement, earth moving, bulldozers and construction brings in the avant-garde of construction sub-contracting in Italy: the Mob. The Camorra, 'ndrangheta and Mafia families have always been here... The risk, precisely in times of crisis like this, is that the criminal organisations arrive to divide up the great business opportunities of Italy between them...

"Franco Arminio, one of the leading poets of this region, the best who has ever written about earthquakes and what they generate, writes in one of his poems: 'Twenty-five years after the earthquake, little remains of the dead. And of the living, even less.'

"We are still in time to prevent this happening in Abruzzo."



Subject: