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Thousands gather in L'Aquila a year after quake

PADDY AGNEW in Rome



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THOUSANDS GATHERED in and around the historic centre of the Abruzzo town of L'Aquila last night as survivors recalled the earthquake which devastated the town exactly one year ago, killing 308 people and leaving 60,000 homeless. As church bells rang out, the names of victims were read aloud in the town's central Piazza del Duomo.

Last year's earthquake was marked last night by a series of concerts, vigils, candlelit processions and a series of highly symbolic moments when sections of the still abandoned centro storico were illuminated. Even after a year, the earthquake prompts bitter polemics: more than 5,000 people are still living in temporary accommodation, mainly in hotels in L'Aquila and on the Adriatic coast.

More controversially, however, many of the survivors' groups have questioned the rebuilding plans, arguing that the Civil Protection Agency got its priorities wrong when it chose to build 19 new centres for 14,000 people in and around L'Aquila, rather than immediately tackle the complicated task of rebuilding the centre of this medieval, walled city.

Many argue that the new centres are geared more towards building speculation than solving L'Aquila's problems. Eugenio Carlomagno, of the lobby L'Aquila, A City To Save, told AFP news agency last weekend: "These places are dormitory towns and nothing else ... This money could have been used differently, especially since these homes cost three times more than planned ... they

could have housed 45,000 people not 14,000.” Speaking to reporters in L’Aquila yesterday, Guido Bertolaso, the head of the Civil Protection Agency, defended the rescue and reconstruction efforts.

“Everything that could have been done was done ... Obviously it’s going to take a number of years before the town is rebuilt.

“But we knew this right from the beginning and we made a precise, strategic choice to build proper homes for people rather than leave them stuck in temporary portakabins.”

Mr Bertolaso, a close aide of prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, suggested that the earthquake had brought out the best in Italians. He pointed out that within 48 hours there were 10,000 rescue workers, many voluntary, on the scene in and around L’Aquila.

The speed and priorities of the rescue effort are not the only controversial issues linked to the L’Aquila earthquake, however.

A series of judicial enquiries are still ongoing into possible building malpractices in what was a well-known earthquake zone. These enquiries could yet lead to charges of manslaughter.