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## Italian earthquake: Centuries of history destroyed

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**By Alan Johnston**  
BBC News, San Felice sul Panaro

**The people of the towns closest to the epicentre of the quake passed a difficult, disturbed night.**

There was a series of aftershocks: one registered a magnitude of 3.7, which is more than enough to jolt you out of your sleep in the most frightening way.

But the tremors are very much weaker now, and nothing like as alarming as they were on Sunday.

This will come as a relief particularly to those people who have been forced to leave their homes.

At least 3,000 have been provided with emergency accommodation either because their building has been damaged, or because they are understandably wary of being inside while the tremors continue.

A school in the town of San Felice sul Panaro has been converted into a reception centre where up to 200 people spent the night. The priority was to assist older pensioners, and those with disabilities.

Eighty-year-old Natalia de'Gidio talked of how the chaos left by the quake made it impossible for her to go home.

"My bed was shaking," she said. "All the furniture was shaking - stuff falling. The house is full of debris. The doors are blocked."

In the small town of Finale Emilia, tents were put up on a football pitch to house about 300 people.

But this region is now being swept by driving rain and cold winds, and camping in these conditions will be a bleak, muddy affair.

### 'Nightmare'

And there is continuing grave concern for the condition of many historic buildings that were damaged by the quake.

Every town and village here has churches, or towers that have stood for centuries, and are regarded with huge affection by the local communities.

Some of these structures were completely destroyed, and others badly weakened.

"We woke up in a nightmare," said Massimo Bondioli, a local council worker in San Felice sul Panaro.

"For years they told us that this was an area of low seismic activity, so nobody was prepared for something like this.

"Beyond destroying some buildings it has destroyed our history. Our monuments - our pride - have been destroyed by this earthquake."

And you see evidence of that destruction in street after street in the worst-hit places: cracks in facades, or bricks and masonry strewn across pavements.

The ancient castle that is the centrepiece of San Felice sul Panaro is in a badly battered state. Parts of the roof structure have collapsed, and gashes and fissures snake their way down the sides of the building in many places.

The full extent and severity of the damage won't yet be clear. And for now this building, like so many others in the area, has simply been cordoned off with lengths of tape.

The immediate need is to keep people away from structures that might still come crashing down in an aftershock.

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