

Venice Flooding Is Worst in a Decade; Severe Weather in Italy Kills at Least 11



ROME — Violent thunderstorms, small tornadoes that blew roofs off homes, and winds equivalent to a Category 3 hurricane lashed Italy from Piedmont to Sicily early this week, leaving at least 11 people dead, many injured, and firefighters and other rescue workers scrambling to respond to emergency calls.

In Venice, ferocious winds drove the high tide to more than 61 inches, or 156 centimeters, above average sea level on Monday, one of the highest levels ever recorded, plunging much of the city under water. It was the highest flood in a decade in Venice, though far short of the record, more than 76 inches above level, set in November 1966.



The high tide in Venice was more than 61 inches, or 156 centimeters, above average sea level on Monday. CreditManuel Silvestri/Reuters

Venetians and tourists tottered on raised walkways throughout the city, while others waded through thigh-high water, many wearing plastic bags on their feet. Many shops and restaurants flooded when barriers across doorways failed to keep the water out.

Some tourists decided to go for a swim in historic Saint Mark's Square, in front of the city's cathedral.

The cathedral itself was damaged by flooding as water submerged part of the floor in the central part of the basilica for only the fifth recorded time in its nine-century history, officials said. The water covered "several dozens of square meters" of the marble pavement in front of the altar of the Madonna Nicopeia, a 12th century icon, and submerged the baptistery, the board responsible for the building said in a statement.

Near the covered entrance to the basilica, the mosaic floor was under as much as 35 inches of water, it said, "soaking the monumental bronze doors, columns and marble." Water levels remained above ground in the basilica for 16 hours.

"It may not be visible to the eye, but structures age because of the salt water drenching the bricks, which were not meant to remain underwater for long; that

goes for bronze, too,” said Pierpaolo Campostrini, one of the board members. “The bricks are like sponges, and if the water levels don’t drop, the water rises several meters to the mosaic level.”

“In one day, the basilica aged 20 years,” he said.

An editorial on Tuesday in the Venice daily *Il Gazzettino* asked what had happened to the Moses Project, the divisive, still-unfinished, multibillion-dollar system of floodgates that has been under construction for years. Venice, built on a lagoon of the Adriatic on Italy’s northeastern coast, has always been vulnerable to flooding, and the system of barriers is supposed to offer some protection as global warming and rising seas make the threat worse.

“If there was one day it would have been useful, it was yesterday,” the editorial read.

Mr. Campostrini, of St. Mark’s, agreed. “That event shouldn’t have happened, not if the Moses Project had been operational,” he said.

The situation was equally dramatic in other Italian regions.

Winds reached 112 miles per hour in Liguria, on Italy’s northwest coast, one of the hardest-hit regions. The Italian news agency ANSA described a “massacre of yachts” in the town of Rapallo, near Genoa, where dozens of boats moored in the port broke loose and crashed against the shore or were driven out to sea.

A storm destroyed the provincial road to Portofino, isolating the picturesque coastal town and stranding residents and tourists. ANSA reported that the eldest son of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Pier Silvio, was stranded with his family in the area, in the castle that he owns. Pier Silvio is deputy chairman and chief executive of the family media group Mediaset.

Hundreds of people were evacuated from their homes in towns in the mountainous Trentino-Alto Adige region, northwest of Venice, after rivers rose over their banks. Newspapers described fish swimming in the streets of one town.

In some places, hillsides soaked by heavy rain gave way.



Cars damaged by storms in Rome on Tuesday. Credit Tiziana Fabi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The operational command of the Civil Protection Department met late Monday to coordinate and deploy disaster relief teams throughout the country, where winds and rains continued with force on Tuesday.

Schools remained closed on Tuesday in many regions. Century-old pine trees toppled in Rome, blocking roads and clogging traffic.



Heavy rain in Monterosso al Mare, a village in the Liguria region, on Monday. CreditMarco Bertorello/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In Venice, the city's high-water telephone message system warned citizens that high tides on Tuesday and Wednesday would be unusually severe, but not as bad as Monday's. A "code orange" was in place, with flooding expected to reach more than 43 inches above sea level.

In Naples, many trees fell in the cemetery of Poggioreale, famed for its tombs and monuments, which was closed to the public.

Mayor Luigi de Magistris of Naples said on Tuesday that the city had been exposed to "an atmospheric earthquake."



A flooded St. Mark's Square. Credit Manuel Silvestri/Reuters

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