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“Non ci abbandonate.” Do not abandon us.

This is how the mayor of Arquata del Tronto bid me farewell after my visit to one of the four municipalities in central Italy that were badly impacted by a string of earthquakes last year. The first (6.0 Richter scale) started on 26 August; followed by a second, lethal shock of 6.5 magnitude on 30 October, causing aftershocks that have continued ever since. The death toll is 300 people; 48 of them in Arquata.

I first met Mayor Aleandro Petrucci during a celebration for World Oceans Day in San Benedetto del Tronto, a quaint tourist centre on Italy’s Adriatic coast, where hotels have been hosting thousands of homeless people from the mountainous earthquake-struck areas. This has

strengthened the bond between the people from inland and their sea hosts.

He invited me to see what was left of Arquata – after getting me the Italian army’s authorization to access the red zone. The local population, meanwhile, has been unable to get back to their homes for the last ten months.



The main road, leading up to a medieval tower still miraculously standing, was dotted by nearly one million tons of rubble. It is as hard for an outsider to imagine what the place looked like before the quake. It is impossible to accept this reality for those who lost everything and are now faced with an uncertain future.

The mayor gently invited me to overcome my reluctance to take pictures, my fear to be perceived like a vulture tourist: “It is for a good cause.”

I learned about the dedication of thousands of volunteers. People like Claudia Filiaggi, a civil protection official responsible for the only facility installed locally to process rubble so that it can be reutilized in the reconstruction. Or Raffaella Milandri, whose NGO has been raising funds for young families.

## **Bringing solidarity to an earthquake-struck village**

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I mentioned the UN's disaster reduction policy. My main commitment, that day, was to bring the UN's solidarity and keep our attention alive.

No, Mr. Mayor, we will not abandon you.