

Funeral mass for 205 dead in quake

by UPI

L'AQUILA, Italy -- A funeral mass was said Friday for victims of the Italian earthquake with 205 coffins lined up at a police barracks outside L'Aquila.

Small white boxes holding the bodies of infants were placed on top of their parents' coffins, The Times of London reported. The coffins were covered with flowers.

Pope Benedict XVI granted a special dispensation for the mass on Good Friday, the only day in the year when Roman Catholics normally cannot take communion. The pope, who plans to visit L'Aquila after Easter, sent a message praying for eternal rest for the dead and courage for those who survived.

The mass was said by Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone and L'Aquila Archbishop Giuseppe Molinari. Oils consecrated during a Holy Thursday service at the Vatican were sent to L'Aquila.

After the Catholic ceremony, an imam was to pray at the coffins of six Muslim victims.

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi attended the service and proclaimed Friday a national day of mourning.

The official death toll was 289, the Italian news agency ANSA reported. The search for victims was to continue through Easter, although the hope of finding survivors was dim.

Napolitano blamed poor construction for many of the deaths in historic L'Aquila and surrounding towns in the Abruzzo region 70 miles north of Rome, the BBC reported.

In the region Thursday, Napolitano said there was "widespread irresponsibility" in the design and construction of modern buildings. Tens of thousands of people were left homeless.

Italian lawmakers approved a package of financial measures to provide money for rent and suspend utility bills for two months, the BBC said.

Aftershocks plagued rescue efforts. A 4.9-magnitude tremor brought down an already damaged four-story building in L'Aquila.

Copyright © 2009, by United Press International. All Rights Reserved.

Funeral mass for 205 dead in quake by UPI