

Environmentalists in Italy fight a 'green' project

By Elisabeth Rosenthal International Herald Tribune

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VENAUS, Italy Along the crumbling road leading into this remote Alpine village stands a crude wooden shack whose purpose is announced by hand-scrawled signs that cover its walls: "Help, the police are killing our valley" and "Resist to exist." Another sign displays a charging locomotive obliterated by a big red X.

Volunteers at this makeshift guard post serve as an early warning system charged with detecting the arrival of railroad construction crews for a pan-European high-speed freight line, a project that environmental groups and residents say will create unfathomable environmental damage here.

"We can assemble hundreds of people in 10 minutes," said one of the men in the shack, who gave his name only as Baggio. "We intend to try to stop this."

Venaus lies at a crucial link in a long-planned freight transport system that is intended to connect Western and Eastern Europe. A line stretching from Barcelona to Kiev is to be the latest axis in a European high-speed rail network, known in Italian as the Treno ad Alta Velocità, or TAV.

To achieve the pan-European dream, two big tunnels - the longer one 53 kilometers, or nearly 35 miles, long - are to be blasted through the mountains on either side of tiny Venaus, which sits in a narrow valley. The two tunnels are to be connected ultimately with a bridge that will carry roaring freight trains over Venaus.

After decades of planning, construction is to start Wednesday.

Far away in Brussels and Rome, officials view the transport route as a bold strategic project that will help move goods across a newly united Europe. They see the project as environmentally sound, because freight will move in trains rather than, as it often does now, in trucks, which cause more pollution.

"This construction will bring huge environmental benefits: a sustainable transport system linking the two sides of the Alps," said Stefaan De Rynck, transportation spokesman at the European Commission in Brussels. "You have to look at the big picture."

But here in Italy's northwest Piedmont region, which includes Turin and a large swath of Alpine valleys, the TAV is widely regarded as an environmental and public health disaster. Last month, 50,000 of the 70,000 inhabitants in the Susa Valley, just a short distance from Venaus, joined a major protest against it.

"For 15 to 20 years, this will be a construction site, with stones, trucks, pollution, dust and all the environmental issues," said Guido Fissori, 60, a retiree at the watch post. "There is a uranium in the mountains on one side and asbestos on the other. Everyone is protesting."

Last month, protesters prevented the Italian police from taking possession of land designated as the construction site for the first tunnel, up a winding road on Mount Rocciamelone, a place of cascading waterfalls and hiking trails.

Since then, teams of the police, including members of the elite Italian antiterrorist squad, have huddled against the cold at checkpoints along the mountain, screening visitors.

"From Barcelona to Kiev, no one else is protesting, except here," said Alessandro Meneghini, the police colonel in charge of guarding the hill.

In official circles, the protesters are regarded as spoilers, and the residents of these Alpine valleys are mostly resigned that, with powerful political forces against them, the 20 billion, or \$23.5 billion, project will go forward.

De Rynck said "if you want a single European market and you want goods to move efficiently, you have to invest in new infrastructure."

The European Commission is predicting a 50 percent increase in freight traffic by 2020, he said, adding that if Europe continued to rely primarily on trucks to transport goods, the societal costs would be unbearable. Air and noise pollution are already a serious problem along major routes, De Rynck said, and accidents in overcrowded Alpine tunnels are common.

"This is urgent," he said. "If we don't act, it will create major problems for the environment, health and road safety."

Still, local politicians and environmental groups feel passionately that this land is being ravaged unnecessarily for the vainglory of Europe. Freight projections are probably exaggerated, they say, and existing track and tunnels could be renovated to meet the demand.

"No one considered the environmental cost here; the cost-benefit of this is absurd," said Roberto Patrucco, a graphic designer who, with his wife and two children, joined a large protest in Turin on Friday. "They are obsessed with grand projects."

It is hard to imagine the huge train project superimposed on this tiny valley, which has snow-covered mountains but little of Switzerland's picture-postcard quality. Rusting equipment dots the fields, an abandoned uranium mine sits on a hill, a hideous bright blue bridge carrying an elevated highway slashes across the valley like a scar.

"No TAV" is spray painted on each of the pylons. "No TAV" banners hang from a large number of the houses. "No TAV" is spray painted in red across every street sign.

"This valley is already choked with infrastructure: a highway, a rail line, two state roads, not to mention a river, which floods regularly," said Vanda Bonardo, the director in Piemonte of Legambiente, the largest environmental group in Italy. "It's a very delicate environment."

To build the tunnels, she said, construction crews will have to remove "a mountain" of rock, creating dust and releasing pollutants into groundwater. Then there is the issue of how to handle the asbestos and uranium in the mountains.

European and Italian officials say that all the required environmental impact studies were completed and that there are construction methods that can keep residents safe from asbestos, for example.

But many here are unconvinced. "There were mountains of environmental impact documents and studies, but they were never really considered," said Nilo Durbiano, the mayor of Venaus.