

29 October 2012

Statement on the Guilty Verdict for Scientists in the L'Aquila Earthquake Case

The April 2009 earthquake (Mw6.3) in the L'Aquila region of central Italy caused over 300 deaths and a great amount of damage in the area. Following this event, seven members of a government committee, which included prominent Earth scientists, were criminally charged with manslaughter. On 22 October 2012, a verdict was announced with all members of the committee found guilty and given 6 year sentences.

The details of the reasoning for the verdict have not yet been made available. According to a report by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corp.) news, however, the prosecutors stated that the charges were not based on the inability to predict the earthquake, but instead on negligence in the analyses of the situation and insufficient communication of information. These charges were supported by the court decision.

The government committee had issued a so called 'safety declaration' to residents. Regretfully, as a result of the notice there were many victims of the earthquake, and as earthquake researchers we must take this fact very seriously. We give prayers for the people that lost their lives and express our condolences to their families and relatives,

In our country, earthquake scientists are actively involved in forming national and local policies concerning earthquake hazards, and we are very concerned that such researchers in Italy are being held directly responsible for earthquake losses. We understand that scientists have the role of carrying out independent research and responsibility for communicating their results to society. When providing important information to the public, researchers must maintain a fair stance and have a sincere approach to the science

As a result of the decision in Italy, we fear that the attitudes of scientists may become inhibited. If expressing opinions about disaster management can lead to criminal liability, researchers may no longer speak so openly, and may make statements not based entirely on science. Over the long-term, this could lead to inadequate scientific evaluations for disaster management policies, and this would be a backward step for society. When committed researchers make honest contributions to efforts in natural disaster reduction, they should not be held liable for crimes.

The events in Italy raise important issues about the role of scientists in our modern world. The Seismological Society of Japan envisions societies more resilient to earthquakes, which can be built on a relationship of mutual trust and the interaction of local government, community residents and researchers who maintain earnest and unbiased efforts in science. We make continued strong commitments to advance these efforts.



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