

Italian Scientists Investigated for Manslaughter for Failing To Warn City Before Earthquake Hit

Alton Parrish, Before It's News, 6-22-10

According to a policy alert from the American Geophysical Union, seven Italian scientists and government officials are under investigation on charges of manslaughter for failure to warn the city of L'Aquila, Italy, before an earthquake hit last year, killing hundreds. The scientists and officials under investigation, who are employees of the National Institute for Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV) and the Civil Protection Department, took part in a meeting of the Major Risks Committee on 31 March 2009.

At the meeting, the committee told L'Aquila city officials that “just because a small series of quakes has been observed [in L'Aquila] there is no reason to suggest that the sequence of low-magnitude tremors are a precursor to a major event,” which was deemed “improbable, although not impossible.” However, on 6 April 2009, the city was struck by a Mw 6.3 earthquake that killed 308 people.

The criminal charges against these scientists and officials are unfounded. Despite decades of scientific research in Italy and in the rest of the world, it is not yet possible to accurately and consistently predict the timing, location, and magnitude of earthquakes before they occur.

It is thus incorrect to assume that the L'Aquila earthquake should have been predicted. The charges may also harm international efforts to understand natural disasters and mitigate associated risk, because risk of litigation will discourage scientists and officials from advising their government or even working in the field of seismology and seismic risk assessment.

Science is making critical contributions to the understanding and mitigation of earthquake hazards in Italy and the world. Examples include providing tools such as seismic risk maps to determine areas of greatest vulnerability, improving seismic wave analysis so that we can better understand how the Earth moves during an earthquake, and increasing our capabilities for seismic monitoring and for providing rapid information on earthquake location and severity for early warning systems and first responders.

It is in the best interest of all countries to reduce earthquake vulnerability through awareness, preparation, and mitigation. Local government officials should work with scientists and engineers to prepare for seismic hazards in that region. To truly mitigate earthquake risk, governments must utilize the long-term hazard assessment, post-earthquake Shake Maps, and other tools created by seismologists to educate residents and inform sound infrastructure policy.

Communities can increase their earthquake preparedness through implementation of building codes based on these long-term hazard assessments, retrofitting older buildings, improving emergency response, and increasing public awareness of the hazard and individual responsibility during and after these tragic events.

In support of the Italian scientists and officials, the INGV has written an open letter to the President of the Republic of Italy. The letter is open for public signatures and, as of 21 June 2010, has 5,028 signatories from around the world, many of whom are geoscientists. Please sign the letter and pass this information on to your colleagues if you support these seven scientists and officials and their right to conduct best scientific practices without risk of persecution.