

Sentenced scientists: Figuring out the L'Aquila earthquake trial

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Early in the morning on April 6, 2009 (local time), an M 6.3 earthquake occurred in central Italy, causing 309 fatalities and severe damage in and around L'Aquila. A meeting of the Major Risk Committee in the Italian government had been held six days before the earthquake. Five scientists and two officials attending this meeting were accused of corporative manslaughter by the families of the fatalities, and they were sentenced to be guilty in October 2012.

L'Aquila is seismically active compared to other areas in Italy, and it was in a state of earthquake swarm for a half year to March 2009. In early March, a couple of people were willfully issuing earthquake predictions so that the area was in slight panic. This panic was made worse by an earthquake as large as M 4 occurred on March 30. Accordingly, the Civil Protection Department of the Italian government called up the Major Risk Committee and held a meeting on March 31 at the region hall in L'Aquila. In the telephone tapping records submitted to the trial court as evidences, the head of the Civil Protection Department told the regional associate of civil protection that this call was "a media operation only for making people calm."

According to the minutes of the Major Risk Committee meeting brought to the prosecutor's office, the vice chairman (scientist) remarked "I heard the vice head of civil protection declare to media, although he is not a geophysicist that when there are seismic sequences there is a discharge of energy and there are more probability that the large shock do not arrive. What can you say?" Since a million of small earthquakes need to occur for discharging the energy of an earthquake as large as M 6, the above declaration is scientifically incorrect. Therefore, the remark of the vice chairman is understood he was worried that the incorrect explanation to the media before the conference meeting would mislead the people as a kind of safety information. This intention of the administration side can be found in the talk of the department head in the telephone tapping records. The safety information was not denied in the press conference after the committee meeting, and local TV news announced "the safety was declared" later. Local newspapers carried similar reports in the issues of the next morning.

Six days after the release of the safety information, a large earthquake occurred against the safety information and this L'Aquila earthquake caused 309 fatalities. Many of them were due to the collapse of buildings of low seismic resistance such as historical buildings. A considerable number of the people among them had been evacuated from such buildings before March 30, but then came back into them following the vice department head's safety information. The families of those people made the accusation. Since the officials on the administration side mainly made the statement to the media before the committee meeting and the press conference after the committee meeting, the officials are responsible for the results of the safety information issued there. On the other hand, the scientists noted their worries about the safety information during the conference meeting as in the vice chairman's remark, so that it is not reasonable that the scientists were sentenced to be guilty of corporative manslaughter. The scientists look having been readily exploited by the officials.

The scientists mostly mentioned only general remarks, saying that many of swarm activities do not lead to a large earthquake but they cannot declare no large earthquake. For example in the minutes, one scientist said "numerous swarms that have not preceded large earthquakes. Obviously, as L'Aquila is a seismic zone, we can not make a statement that there will not be large earthquakes." Another scientist said "There is a low probability of a large earthquake in the short term, as the 1703 earthquake, but this can not be excluded in a definitive way."

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