

Statements against the L'Aquila trial and three proposals from a different standpoint

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The L'Aquila earthquake in central Italy on 6 April 2009 collapsed many houses and caused many fatalities. Failing to warn of this disaster, the L'Aquila court sentenced to jail researchers who attended the governmental committee (Commissione Grandi Rischi) on 31 March 2009. Against this, not only the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV, where two accused scientists were working) but also many international and domestic associations involved in seismological research announced their concern about the sentence. Although the final judicial conclusion will be left to the higher court, the present case will be remembered in the history of science. Investigating the statements by the Seismological Society of Japan and others, i.e., the International Association for Earthquake Engineering (IAEE), the Royal Society and the U. S. National Academy of Science, the Seismological Society of America (SSA), the Japan Association for Earthquake Engineering, the Geological Society of Japan and the International Association of Seismology and Physics of the Earth Interior (IASPEI), the author would like to ask questions about those statements and to present his counterproposals.

Some statements emphasized the importance of the freedom of scientific research and open discussion, protesting to convict the contribution of scientists. Including them, most of the statements criticized the present sentence or explain the situation of the scientists to the judicial community in Italy. Although they sought to protect the accused Italian scientists, it would also appeal not to investigate the accountability of the scientists in their own countries. In contrast, the statement of the Seismological Society of Japan appealed directly to the national citizens not to blame the scientists participating the administration for disaster prevention without limiting the particular cases. It is, however, questionable to be accepted by the public or obtain a historical evaluation that scientists will always be exempted from all responsibility. Apart from the statement of INGV, i.e., the institute involved, the statement that no scientists will contribute to the administration unless they are unconditionally exempted from responsibility is somewhat disappointing if it is actuary true in the respective scientific society.

In order to avoid cases in which scientists will be prosecuted for their conduct, or rather, in order not to cause or mitigate avoidable disasters, the author proposes the following three points to the scientific community and to the public:

(1) Scientists should state their scientific knowledge and judgment as clearly as possible. In particular, they should clarify what subjects that cannot be judged conclusively. (2) The public is requested to understand that it will sometimes be difficult to make a conclusive scientific judgment. Hopefully probabilities will be discussed more widely in the public domain. (3) It is also requested to the Press not to force a conclusive judgment that is unsubstantiated by scientific examination. In addition, not only based on authorized or major sources, but also a different view, if existing, should be considered more in some cases.

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