



# INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

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Statement by the Executive Committee

### Conviction of Italian Scientists in L'Aquila Trial

The devastating consequences of the April 6, 2009, earthquake in the Italian city of L'Aquila included more than 300 deaths, hundreds of injuries, and extensive loss of property. It was a grievous tragedy. Yet, the sentencing this week on multiple counts of manslaughter of six Italian scientists to six years in prison (two years more than sought by the prosecution) and enormous fines, will, if appeals are unsuccessful, only compound this tragedy. The scientists are: Franco Barberi, Enzo Boschi, Gian Michele Calvi, Mauro Dolce, Claudio Eva, and Giulio Selvaggi.

These scientists attended an impromptu one hour meeting on March 31, 2009, in L'Aquila, that was convened by the National Commission for Forecast and Prevention of Major Risks. According to a translation of the meeting minutes, the scientists were asked to provide an up-to-date and reliable assessment of the seismic activity underway in the region, which they appear to have done to the best of their ability. Unfortunately, the information previously and subsequently provided to the alarmed public by Italian officials, but falsely attributed to these scientists, was inaccurate and unscientific.

Because earthquakes are unpredictable, the public's perception of risk is heightened and it often turns to scientists for reassurances about its safety. This puts enormous responsibility on their shoulders, including that of assuring—to the extent possible—that their information and advice is accurately communicated to the public. In this, the Italian scientists failed, but surely that does not constitute manslaughter.

Risk communication and mitigation efforts have both strengths and limitations. They also pose a continuing challenge to scientists worldwide, who have much to learn and much to teach their government's decision makers, as reflected in a report by the [International Commission on Earthquake Forecasting for Civil Protection](#). This report was prepared following the L'Aquila earthquake in response to a request from the Italian government to assess the scientific knowledge of earthquake predictability and to provide guidelines for the implementation of operational earthquake forecasting—a positive outcome from a tragic occurrence.

The sentencing for criminal manslaughter of the scientists named above, who assessed the tremors prior to the earthquake in a situation that was not conducive to scientific discourse and whose statements were fabricated when reported to the public, will serve only to add injustice to this tragedy. They should be acquitted.

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Academies in the Network support and promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, assist unjustly incarcerated nonviolent professional colleagues, address grave science-related human rights issues, and advocate for member institutions whose independence is threatened.

(The U.S. National Academies, non-profit, non-governmental honorary societies, host the Network secretariat.)

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