



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR EARTHQUAKE ENGINEERING

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Giorgio Napolitano
His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Italy
Palazzo Quirinale
Piazza del Quirinale – 00187 Rome, Italy

November 14, 2012

Dear Mr. President,

I am writing on behalf of the European Association for Earthquake Engineering (EAE), to express our concern for the conviction of six scientists and one government official, who were members of a government panel on earthquake risk (CGR), by the Court of L'Aquila.

The conviction was based on the failure of those accused to warn the population before the strong earthquake of 6 April 2009 that killed about 300 people. We believe it is unacceptable to accuse and legally indict scientists and members of a governmental panel because they failed to make a prediction of an extreme natural event in a particular place or because their statements are not considered appropriate or misinterpreted by the media, by some scientists and engineers.

The earthquake rupture process is a very complex issue that cannot be predicted with our present capabilities and knowledge and we believe that it will not be possible for many years to come. Even though from time to time there are scientists, or just amateurs, who claim that they can make predictions that include the time and location of the earthquake event, the scientific community at large treats them as speculations, and they should be disregarded by the government officials worldwide. This case, as many others in our experience, also shows very vividly how media, and thus certain fractions of the society, can misinterpret the scientific statements and, sometimes, misuse them for their purposes. We would like to emphasise that although there are some views of which you are no doubt aware that the conviction was not based on the scientists being unable to predict the earthquake but for having issued a forecast of "no eminent risk", the truth is that being unable to predict an earthquake and failing to properly assess the risk are essentially the same thing; hence all the difficulties in communicating the risk are a logical consequence of this. Clearly, the authorities in charge can either evacuate a city (or province) or not; 'a la carte' evacuations are simply not a real option and any such suggestion by the authorities only creates confusion and further tension in a situation that is already critical enough.

Furthermore, we believe that convicting scientists to heavy sentences for adhering to accepted scientific practices may have very adverse effects on academic research, and may prevent free exchange of ideas that is essential for progress in science and discouraging them from participating in matters of great public importance, which also has repercussions on seismic risk management in the future.

Finally, focusing the attention of the public opinion on possible warnings of the population for highly improbable earthquake will create expectations in this matter, thus relaxing people with respect to the real problem of seismic prevention, which is one of strengthening existing vulnerable constructions. This is a responsibility of politics and of every single citizen.

We seek your assistance and support to relieve these scientists from this unprecedented and inconceivable conviction..

Most respectfully

Prof. Mihail Garevski
President