

Italian scientists on trial for manslaughter over 2009 quake

September 19 2011, by Ljubomir Milasin

Top Italian scientists go on trial Tuesday, accused of manslaughter by playing down the risks of the devastating 2009 earthquake in the central city of L'Aquila in a case that some see as an unfair indictment of science.

Prosecutors allege that the seven defendants -- six leading scientists and a government official -- should have warned residents to flee their homes ahead of the April 6, 2009 quake that killed more than 300 people in the capital of Italy's Abruzzo region.

The experts were members of a panel that had met six days before the quake to assess risks after hundreds of tremors had shaken the medieval walled city.

At that meeting, the committee headed by Franco Barberi of the Civil Protection Agency analysed data on more than 400 low-magnitude tremors that shook the region during the previous four months and determined that the activity was not a prelude to a major quake.

The experts are accused of giving overly reassuring information to the local residents who could have taken adequate protective measures if they had been properly informed.

According to the indictment issued last May, the seven are suspected of "negligence and imprudence... of having provided an approximative, generic and ineffective assessment of [seismic activity](#) risks as well as

incomplete, imprecise and contradictory information."

The seven include such prominent scientists as Enzo Boschi, until recently the president of Italy's National Institute of [Geophysics](#) and [Volcanology](#) (INGV), or Claudio Eva, a physics professor at the University of Genoa.

The experts had made it clear that it was not possible to predict whether a stronger quake would occur but had recommended stricter enforcement of anti-seismic measures, particularly regarding building construction.

Many in the scientific community however argue that the case effectively amounts to putting science on trial.

In an open letter sent to Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, more than 5,000 scientists said the seven defendants essentially face criminal charges for failing to predict quakes, even though it remains technically impossible to pinpoint the time, location and strength of a future earthquake in the short term.

"This is a trial which opens on very shaky foundations. You cannot put science on trial," said Alfredo Biondi, Eva's lawyer, who recalled that his client had during the meeting of the expert panel stated that "one cannot rule out a major quake".

The lawyer also slammed the "absolute inconsistency of the prosecution" which first blamed the experts for "predicting the risk" and then for "failing to assess it".

But Vincenzo Vittorini, a doctor who founded the association "309 martyrs" and lost his wife and daughter in the disaster, said, "I hope that this trial will change mindsets and will lead to greater attention given to

communication on risks."

"No one expected to be told the exact time of the quake. We just wanted to be warned that we were sitting on a bomb," he added

Some 120,000 people were affected by the L'Aquila quake, which also destroyed the city's historic centers and medieval churches.

In the September 14 issue of the science weekly Nature focused on the L'Aquila trial, Thomas Jordan, head of the International Commission on Earthquake Forecasting (ICEF), said the case raises a fundamentally important issue about risk assessment.

Italy's INGV has for several years drawn up a map of seismic risks in Italy and L'Aquila has since 2006 been within the highest-risk zone.

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