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The Aftershocks of L'Aquila: The Indictment of Italian Seismologists for Manslaughter

Helen Lin

April 6, 2009 changed the lives of citizens in the central Italian town of L'Aquila in the Abruzzo Mountain region. At 3:23 am, a 6.3 magnitude earthquake jolted the picturesque medieval fortress-town, killing 308 people and reducing the town to rubble. Consequent additional quakes hindered rescue efforts and further damaged the quiet town.

The citizens of L'Aquila claimed that the assurances of the Serious Risks Commission, a government panel charged with monitoring and assessing the tremors in the months preceding the earthquake, persuaded them to remain in town. When asked if the public should worry, commission member Bernardo De Bernardis responded no. In fact, when asked if citizens should sit back and relax, he responded, "Absolutely, with a Montepulciano doc [a Tuscan red wine]." In 2010, the Serious Risks Commission came under investigation. The seven members of the Commission sit on many major committees in Italy:

- Enzo Boschi, President of the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV)
- Franco Barberi, Committee Vice President
- Bernardo De Bernardinis, former Vice-president of the Civic Protection Department; current President of the Institute for Environmental Protection and Research
- Giulio Selvaggi, Director of the National Earthquake Centre
- Gian Michele Calvi, Director of the European Centre for Training and Research in Earthquake Engineering
- Claudio Eva, Earth Scientist at the University of Genoa
- Mauro Dolce, Director of the Office of Seismic Risk at the Civil Protection Department

In May 2011, Judge Giuseppe Romano Gargarella indicted the seven and ordered them to trial on September 20. The citizens of L'Aquila and the prosecution asked for \$67 million in compensations. In response, 5200 seismologists wrote protest letters against the indictment. International scientific groups condemned the charges. The Seismological Society of America wrote a letter to Italy's president calling this trial an "unprecedented attack on science."

Interestingly, the case centers not on a failure to predict the earthquake, but rather the commission's false assurances to the public. Earthquakes are currently impossible to predict because it is difficult to know the exact threshold of stress required to break a fault line. Current tools only allow measurements of ground deformation. Additionally, the L'Aquila fault system



is complex with several strike-slip faults. Seismologists have yet to find a conclusive method for predicting earthquakes. A recent study by Giampaolo Giuliani is looking into predicting earthquakes based on the amount of radon gas that leaks through fault lines. Other studies are following to develop accurate means of prediction.

The prosecution in the trials alleged that the experts gave the public an "approximate, generic, and ineffective assessment of seismic activity risks as well as incomplete, imprecise, and contradictory information." Experts had held an emergency meeting six days before the earthquake due to the occurrence of several smaller quakes in the region, one of which registered at a magnitude of 4.1. The seismologists on trial maintain that there was no evidence that a major earthquake was imminent, although it was perhaps probable. It was this advice to the town which gave a false sense of security.

Cases like these are far from unusual. Giuseppe Zamberletti, the former chief of Italy's civil protection agency, was placed under investigation after he ordered the evacuation of several towns in Garfagnana, an area in the province of Lucca following unusual seismic activity. Zamberletti was accused of causing public alarm when the major earthquake never occurred, but his case never went to trial. Alredo Biondi, one of the defense lawyers, said, "[In Italy], often there's no punishment, but plenty of criminal charges to choose from."

After a three-hour hearing on September 20, the trial was adjourned until October 1st. But what will this trial mean for the scientific community, especially those in charge of warning the public about natural disasters? Many of these events contain certain elements of unpredictability. As seen with Hurricane Irene, hurricanes can weaken or strengthen during their courses. Tornadoes are even more fickle as they can destroy one house and not another on the same street in an instant. Perhaps these trials will lead scientists to be overly cautious in their predictions. Is this necessarily a bad thing if it could save lives (assuming people listen, of course)? The question lingers, then, as to what extent the scientific community will be affected by the outcome of the trials. While it is unlikely that the outcome will imminently affect US natural disaster policies, the aftermath is definitely one to follow.

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