



Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich  
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich



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Swiss Seismological Service

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Prof. Stefano Gresta  
President INGV  
Via di Vigna Murata, 605  
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Italy

Zürich, November 7, 2012

Dear Prof. Gresta

The Swiss Seismological Service at ETH Zurich has followed with deep concern the developments in Italy following the tragic L'Aquila earthquake of 2009. The recent manslaughter conviction of six members of the Grand Commission on High Risks and one government official has the potential to seriously affect the essential communication between science, civil protection and the public.

The reality is earthquakes cannot currently be predicted. The overwhelming majority of all earthquake swarms subside without a catastrophic event and the majority of all mainshocks are not preceded by foreshock activity or swarms. These are basic facts that are widely accepted in the scientific community, and they also form the basis of real-time earthquake risk assessment in Italy. The only viable strategy for earthquake risk reduction is therefore the implementation of construction practices appropriate for the regional long-term earthquake hazard. The scientists that were convicted in L'Aquila have devoted much of their careers to improving the seismic safety of their nation, making the seemingly harsh and surprisingly universally applied judgment even more tragic.

We believe that now is the time for a renewed dialog on earthquake risk mitigation and crisis communication between scientists, government officials and the public. Scientists need assurance that they can provide their assessment of current situations and possible developments, which they deliver based on the best available science but which nevertheless will always contain uncertainties, without fear of later prosecution, in particular as in hindsight those assessments may at times appear to be incorrect. Societies need to accept that nature remains often unpredictable, especially in the case of earthquakes. With this letter we would like to express our hope that such a dialogue will take place now also in Italy, so that there can be a renewed focus on improving earthquake safety.

With best wishes

Stefan Wiemer