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AGI Statement on the Conviction of Italian Seismologists

Alexandria, Va – On October 22, 2012, in L'Aquila, Italy, six seismologists and one Italian government official were convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six years in prison. The seismologists and official had been on trial for not adequately warning the public about the danger of a potential earthquake prior to the L'Aquila earthquake in April 2009 that killed 309 people. Central to the question of manslaughter was whether there was a direct link between the reassuring statements of the commission on which the defendants served and the deaths from the earthquake.

Scientists are frequently called on to serve direct public needs, as indeed they should be. The American Geosciences Institute (AGI) believes that this is an appropriate role for earth scientists to undertake when the question is in their area of expertise, just as a medical doctor may be expected to assist in a medical emergency. Likewise, just as that medical doctor can assume protection from liability as long as standard and accepted procedures were followed at the scene of the emergency, AGI believes that scientists should be allowed to present their best recommendations without fear of retribution. This case, while complicated, puts scientists worldwide on alert that they may be attacked if, in hindsight, their best recommendations fell short of serving the public good. AGI feels that this is bad for science, and bad for the public good.

In a blogpost (<http://www.earthmagazine.org/article/hazardous-living-italian-seismologists-tragically-convicted-manslaughter>) on EARTH Magazine's web site, Dr. Thomas Jordan, the 2012 winner of AGI's Outstanding Contribution to the Public Understanding of the Geosciences Award and Director of the Southern California Earthquake Center (SCEC), told EARTH Magazine, "This won't help those of us who are trying to improve how risks from natural hazards are communicated between scientists and the public."

AGI believes the best approach to mitigating the effects of future earthquakes is to advance education, public awareness, and preparedness initiatives such as SCEC's ShakeOut earthquake drills. When these initiatives are paired with robust natural hazards research and development efforts and continued use of observational, analytical, and monitoring tools, we can begin to reduce the significant toll natural hazards have on society. Scientists must be allowed to communicate their findings through carefully defined relationships between appropriate scientists and those public officials responsible for civil protection, without fear of retribution when those findings are the result of best practices at the time.

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The American Geosciences Institute is a nonprofit federation of geoscientific and professional associations that represents more than 250,000 geologists, geophysicists and other earth scientists. Founded in 1948, AGI provides information services to geoscientists, serves as a voice of shared interests in the profession, plays a major role in strengthening geoscience education, and strives to increase public awareness of the vital role the geosciences play in society's use of resources, resiliency to natural hazards, and interaction with the environment.