



Are Humans to Blame for Deadly Earthquakes?

In at least two nations of the European Union, the notion that earthquakes are “natural disasters” or “[acts of God](#)” is being challenged on a fundamental level. In both Italy and Spain, earthquakes — or their deadly effects — are being blamed on human activity, and six men now face lengthy prison sentences for deaths which resulted from one quake.



The prison sentences meted out to six scientists in an Italian court of law resulted from the deaths of more than 300 people in a 2009 quake in the city of L’Aquila. [As CNN reported in an October 23 story](#), all six scientists were convicted of manslaughter in connection with the earthquake-related deaths:

The court in L’Aquila sentenced the scientists and a government official Monday to six years in prison, ruling that they didn’t accurately communicate the risk of the earthquake in 2009 that killed more than 300 people.

The trial centered on a meeting a week before the 6.3-magnitude quake struck. At the meeting, the experts determined that it was “unlikely” but not impossible that a major quake would take place, despite concern among the city’s residents over recent seismic activity.

Prosecutors said the defendants provided “inaccurate, incomplete and contradictory information about the dangers” facing L’Aquila.

In a world in which radical environmentalists seem prepared to blame every temperature fluctuation or freak storm on manmade global warming, the move to hold men criminally liable for an earthquake is perhaps not that hard to imagine. Nevertheless, the reaction of other scientists to the manslaughter convictions was noteworthy:

“To predict a large quake on the basis of a relatively commonplace sequence of small earthquakes, and to advise the local population to flee” would constitute “both bad science and bad public policy,” said David Oglesby, an associate professor at the earth sciences faculty of the University of California, Riverside.

“If scientists can be held personally and legally responsible for situations where predictions don’t pan out, then it will be very hard to find scientists to stick their necks out in the future,” Oglesby said in a statement.

Roger Musson, the head of seismic hazard and archives at the British Geological Survey, echoed that feeling in a comment published on the organization’s Twitter feed. “It’s chilling that people can be jailed for giving a scientific opinion in the line of their work,” he said.

However, critics would note that scientists have expected for years that nations and corporations would



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endure massive economic upheaval, “carbon taxes” and [redistribution of trillions of dollars](#) from first-world economies to the developing nations to avert a purported pattern of manmade climate change. But even for scientists who may have become accustomed to helping to shape the course of nations by means of their prognostications, still the responsibility for being held accountable for their proclamations comes as a shock.

The simplest course of action for the scientific community would be to eschew a claim of divine omniscience when it comes to those aspects of nature beyond human knowledge and control.

However, even as scientists were facing prison sentences for the proclamations regarding one earthquake, other scientists were busy engaging in speculations of their own. In Spain, scientists are now blaming a 2011 quake in the town of Lorca on wells that had been drilled deep in the earth to meet the water needs of local agriculture. An article for the Associated Press (“[Scientists link deep wells to deadly Spain quake](#)”) the same day as the convictions in Italy became public demonstrates that scientists are also prepared to engaged in the “blame game” when it comes to natural disasters:

Farmers drilling ever deeper wells over decades to water their crops likely contributed to a deadly earthquake in southern Spain last year, a new study suggests. The findings may add to concerns about the effects of new energy extraction and waste disposal technologies.

Nine people died and nearly 300 were injured when an unusually shallow magnitude-5.1 quake hit the town of Lorca on May 11, 2011. It was the country’s worst quake in more than 50 years, causing millions of euros in damage to a region with an already fragile economy.

Using satellite images, scientists from Canada, Italy and Spain found the quake ruptured a fault running near a basin that had been weakened by 50 years of groundwater extraction in the area.

During this period, the water table dropped by 250 meters (274 yards) as farmers bored ever deeper wells to help produce the fruit, vegetables and meat that are exported from Lorca to the rest of Europe. In other words, the industry that propped up the local economy in southern Spain may have undermined the very ground on which Lorca is built.

The researchers noted that even without the strain caused by water extraction, a quake would likely have occurred at some point.

Whether or not the wells played a role in the particular timing of the Lorca quake, the final concession by the researchers — that the quake would have happened at some point, regardless of human activity — highlights the harm caused by the politicization and criminalization of natural disasters. The Italian manslaughter trials raise obvious questions: Should the Spanish government now put on trial those who constructed the wells? What about the farmers who benefited from those wells — are they accomplices to manslaughter?

Contrary to the claims of radical environmentalism, the occurrence of natural disasters is still far beyond the ability of modern science to detect perfectly — let alone avert. With scientists now publicly speculating about the damage which could be done to science if their colleagues can be prosecuted for making a “bad call,” what about businessmen, governments, and even individual citizens, who find their actions — or inaction — faulted at some future date by purveyors of politicized science?

For those who are concerned by such a misunderstanding of the role of science in public policy and private industry, the conviction in L’Aquila and the speculations in Lorca are harbingers of a dangerous new trend in environmentalism.



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