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Joint Statement of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the French Académie des sciences,
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On the science-based communication of risks following the recent sentencing of Italian scientists

On 22 October 2012, a court in L'Aquila sentenced seven members of the Italian National Commission for the Forecast and Prevention of Major Risks to prison terms of several years. The verdict has sparked a worldwide discussion on the legal aspects of the accountability of scientists who advise government institutions. Scientists must participate in this discussion actively and as objectively as possible. The German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the French Académie des sciences therefore expressly support the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, the Italian National Academy of Sciences, in its endeavours to set up an independent expert commission of geologists and legal experts. The role of this commission will be to examine the scientific and legal aspects of the L'Aquila verdict.

Scientific research is substantially motivated by the aim of providing greater protection against natural disasters. In the case of uncontrollable events such as cyclones, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, scientific forecasting methods are becoming increasingly important. Scientists and representatives of state institutions must work together with mutual trust in order to inform the public responsibly, and on the basis of reliable data, about possible risks.

In their risk forecasts, scientists assess the probabilities of future events. Probability-based statements are per se fraught with uncertainty. At all times, scientists must communicate this fundamental fact as clearly as possible. This is no easy task when it involves communicating with public-sector decision-makers and concerned members of the public who expect clear forecasts. However, scientists cannot – and should not – absolve themselves of this responsibility.

It is very unfortunate when the trust between scientists, state institutions and the affected members of the public is profoundly damaged. This occurred as a result of the devastating earthquake in L'Aquila on 6 April 2009. It is thus in the interests of all those involved that the events are reconstructed comprehensively, precisely and objectively. Only in this way is it possible to evaluate on a reliable basis whether the persons involved performed their duties appropriately in the situation in question.

The scientific community must also take an active part in the necessary examination process from the start. The decision of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei to set up an independent expert commission to examine the L'Aquila verdict is a clear and decisive signal in this regard.

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