

ESO, the European Southern Observatory, was created in 1962 to "... establish and operate an astronomical observatory in the southern hemisphere, equipped with powerful instruments, with the aim of furthering and organising collaboration in astronomy ..." It is supported by eight countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. ESO operates at two sites. It operates the La Silla observatory in the Atacama desert, 600 km north of Santiago de Chile, at 2,400 m altitude, where several optical telescopes with diameters up to 3.6 m and a 15-m submillimetre radio telescope (SEST) are now in operation. In addition, ESO is in the process of building the Very Large Telescope (VLT) on Paranal, a 2,600 m high mountain approximately 130 km south of Antofagasta, in the driest part of the Atacama desert. The VLT consists of four 8.2-metre and three 1.8-metre telescopes. These telescopes can also be used in combination as a giant interferometer (VLTI). The first 8.2-metre telescope (called ANTU) is since April 1999 in regular operation, and also the second one (KUEYEN) has already delivered pictures of excellent quality. Over 1200 proposals are made each year for the use of the ESO telescopes. The ESO Headquarters are located in Garching, near Munich, Germany. This is the scientific, technical and administrative centre of ESO where technical development programmes are carried out to provide the La Silla and Paranal observatories with the most advanced instruments. There are also extensive astronomical data facilities. In Europe ESO employs about 200 international staff members, Fellows and Associates; in Chile about 70 and, in addition, about 130 local staff members.

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Tragic Car Accident Involves ESO Employees

Saturday, May 27, turned into a tragic day for ESO. The team installing TIMMI2 at La Silla, went on an excursion to the Elqui valley, 70 km east of the city of La Serena and suffered a serious car accident, crashing against another car driving from the opposite direction.

Dr. Hans-Georg Reinmann, from the University of Jena, died in the crash, while Mr. Ralf Wagner (ESO Associate), from Germany, was seriously injured and had to be taken to the intensive care unit of the Hospital de Coquimbo. The other three persons travelling in the car, Helena Relke, from the University of Jena, Ulrich Käufel and Armin Silber, from ESO Garching, were injured to a lesser degree.

Ralf Wagner remained in a critical condition for a period of three weeks. He was eventually transferred to the Clínica Alemana in Santiago, where he is slowly recovering from multiple lesions and fractures.

During the process, a large amount of blood was requested and donated by the ESO staff, in order to support the case.

A family with two children travelled in the other car involved in the crash. One of the children was critically injured. He is now out of danger, but unfortunately may remain seriously impaired.

We would like to thank the ESO staff who provided blood and personal assistance in this emergency. It should also be mentioned that the Chilean authorities and medical services assisted us beyond their call of duty.

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