

## Bright blazar flares with CTA

**M. Cerruti,<sup>a,\*</sup> J. Finke,<sup>b</sup> G. Grolleron,<sup>c</sup> J.P. Lenain,<sup>c</sup> T. Hovatta,<sup>d</sup> M. Joshi,<sup>e</sup> E. Lindfors,<sup>d</sup> P. Morris,<sup>f</sup> M. Petropoulou,<sup>g</sup> P. Romano,<sup>h</sup> S. Vercellone<sup>h</sup> and M. Zacharias<sup>i</sup> for the CTA Consortium**

<sup>a</sup>Université Paris Cité, CNRS, Astroparticule et Cosmologie, F-75013 Paris, France

<sup>b</sup>U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, Code 7653, 4555 Overlook Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20375-5352, USA

<sup>c</sup>Laboratoire de Physique Nucléaire et des Hautes Energies (LPNHE), Sorbonne Université, Université Paris Cité, CNRS/IN2P3, F-75005, Paris, France

<sup>d</sup>Finnish Centre for Astronomy with ESO (FINCA), University of Turku, Vesilinnantie 5, 20014 University of Turku, Finland

<sup>e</sup>Research Computing, Information Technology Services, Northeastern University, USA

<sup>f</sup>Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY, Platanenallee 6, D-15738 Zeuthen, Germany

<sup>g</sup>Department of Physics, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, University Campus, Zografos, GR 15783, Greece

<sup>h</sup>INAF - Osservatorio Astronomico di Brera, Via Brera 28, 20121 Milano, Italy

<sup>i</sup>Landessternwarte, Universität Heidelberg, Königstuhl, 69117, Heidelberg, Germany

E-mail: [cerruti@apc.in2p3.fr](mailto:cerruti@apc.in2p3.fr)

The TeV extragalactic sky is dominated by blazars, radio-loud active galactic nuclei with a relativistic jet pointing towards the Earth. Blazars show variability that can be quite exceptional both in terms of flux (orders of magnitude of brightening) and time (down to the minute timescale). This bright flaring activity contains key information on the physics of particle acceleration and photon production in the emitting region, as well as the structure and physical properties of the jet itself. The TeV band is accessed from the ground by Cherenkov telescopes that image the pair cascade triggered by the interaction of the gamma ray with the Earth's atmosphere. The Cherenkov Telescope Array (CTA) represents the upcoming generation of imaging atmospheric Cherenkov telescopes, with a significantly higher sensitivity and larger energy coverage with respect to current instruments. It will thus provide us with unprecedented statistics on blazar light-curves and spectra. In this contribution we present the results from realistic simulations of CTA observations of bright blazar flares, taking as input state-of-the-art numerical simulations of blazar emission models and including all relevant observational constraints.

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\*Speaker

## 1. Introduction

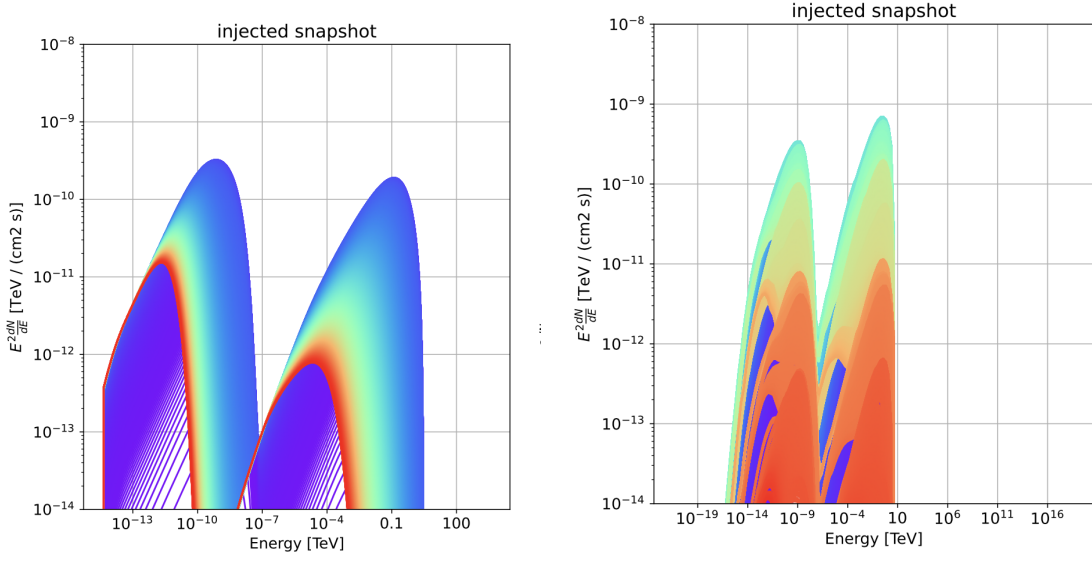
The current generation of Imaging Atmospheric Cherenkov Telescopes (IACTs), composed of the three arrays MAGIC, H.E.S.S., and VERITAS, has greatly increased our knowledge of the very-high-energy  $\gamma$ -ray (VHE, energies greater than 100 GeV) sky, bringing the number of known VHE sources from a dozen to about 250, in a bit less than twenty years of data taking [10]. The extra-galactic component of the VHE sky is dominated by active galactic nuclei (AGN), i.e. accreting super-massive black holes, of the blazar type. Within the unified AGN model, a blazar is a radio-loud AGN whose relativistic jet points in the direction of the observer. The relativistic boosting of the emission is what makes blazars particularly bright within the AGN population. They are characterized by non-thermal emission over a broad range of wavelengths, from radio up to VHE, a high degree of polarization in radio, optical, and X-rays, and they exhibit remarkable variability in both brightness (with significant increases spanning orders of magnitude) and time-scales (reaching as short as minute-scale variability). The rapid variability is of particular interest, because time changes in the emission encode important information about the physical properties of the emitting region, the emission processes at work in it, as well as the acceleration processes that are energizing the particles in the jet (leptons or hadrons) [2, 4].

The next generation IACT, the Cherenkov Telescope Array, CTA [5], is currently under construction. It will consist of two arrays, one in the Northern Hemisphere, on the Canary island of La Palma, close to the running MAGIC telescopes, and one in the Southern Hemisphere, at the Paranal Observatory in Chile. In order to maximize the scientific return of the instrument, the CTA Consortium is currently working on simulations of the expected outcomes of the observations. The work presented in this contribution is part of the preparation for the CTA AGN Key Science Project [5]. What is discussed here represents a part of this larger effort, and focuses on the simulation of future CTA observations of blazar flares, concentrating on the study of rapid variability with a particular emphasis on the capability to reconstruct spectral variability. A complementary study (shown in these proceedings by Grolleron et al. [9]) focuses on the long-term variability. The preliminary results of this work have been presented in Cangemi et al. [3].

## 2. Simulations

The first step of the simulation is to input theoretical models that have been developed to describe data from current observatories. In order to be as general as possible, we do not fit existing data, but we rather produce theoretical models that can approximately reproduce (in terms of flux and time variability) observed flares. In this contribution, we limit ourselves to two different models that approximately describe the variability observed in the well known VHE blazar Mrk 421. Input models are provided in the form of time-dependent spectral energy distributions, produced over a broad spectral range, from radio to VHE. The next step is then to simulate CTA observations: this is done using the CTAAGNVAR pipeline<sup>1</sup>, which is built upon the official CTA high-level analysis tool, Gammapy [7]. CTAAGNVAR reads the theoretical AGN spectrum as input, and produces a

<sup>1</sup><https://gitlab.cta-observatory.org/guillaume.grolleron/ctaagnvar>

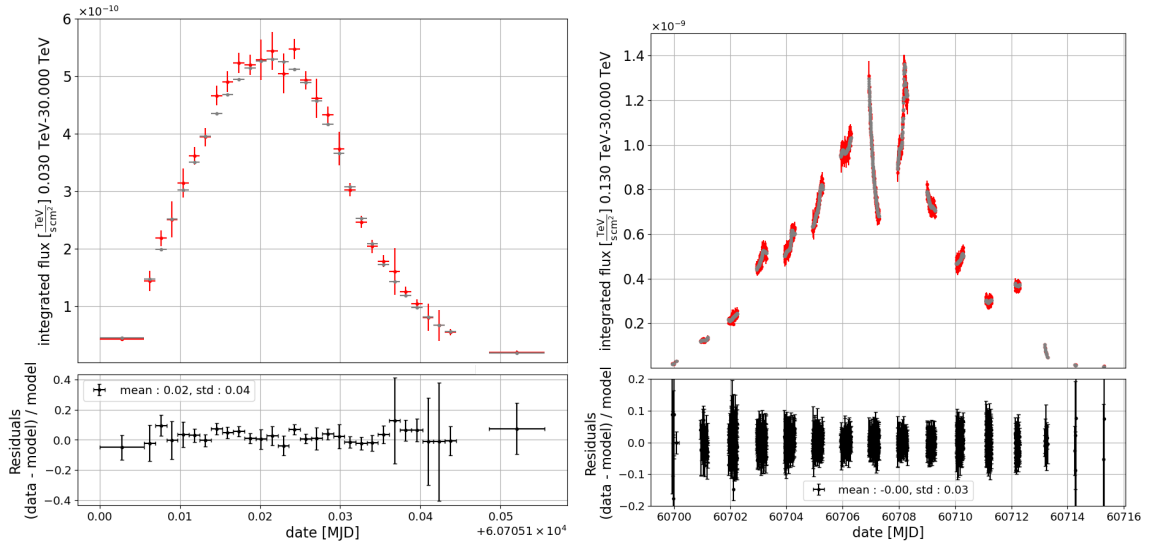


**Figure 1:** Theoretical SEDs provided as input for the CTA simulations. Left: model A; Right: model B (see text for details). The color code, from violet to red, represents the elapsed time.

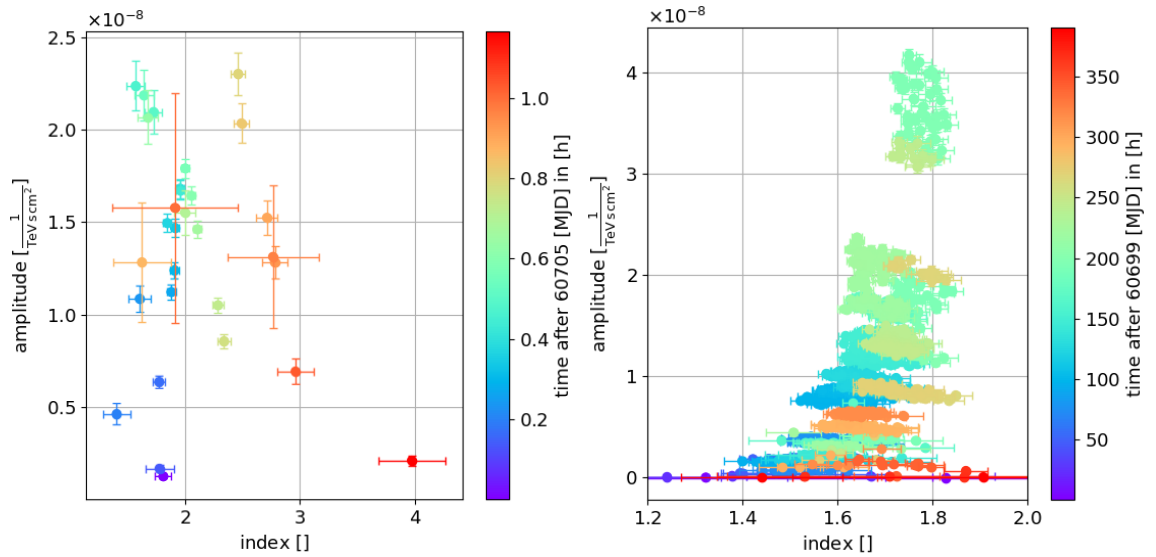
simulated CTA observation including realistic observational constraints as outputs. As the zenith angle of the source will vary during an observing period, the software implements source tracking and selects the appropriate instrumental response functions (IRF). Once the CTA simulated spectra are produced, they are then fitted using phenomenological spectral functions in order of increasing complexity (i.e. a simple power-law, a log-parabola, a power-law with exponential cut-off; the more complex model is considered only if it improves the fit), as done by observers on real data. Absorption on the extragalactic background light is included when performing the fit. The best-fit model parameters can then be studied, in order to investigate the capability of CTA to reconstruct the input models and ultimately discriminate among them. In this contribution we focus on specific observational properties: the capability of CTA to reconstruct spectral variability and hysteresis whenever present in the input model. This is a very important feature, already detected in the X-ray band in blazars, predicted in the VHE band by some of the models, but as yet undetected in the VHE band [1]. In the following, we show the results from two different theoretical inputs: a single-zone leptonic model in which the acceleration mechanism is not explicit, and electrons are assumed to be injected with a power-law shape and then cool down as they radiate (in the following, model A)[8]; and a flaring activity triggered by magnetic reconnection (in the following, model B)[6]. The input models are shown in Figure 1.

### 3. Results

The results of the simulations are shown in Figures 2 to 4. In Figure 2 we show simulated CTA light-curves (using the CTA North IRFs) for both models: model A represents a fast flare happening during a single observing night, while model B covers a larger data set of approximately two weeks, even though during the brightest nights fast intra-night variability can also be observed. In Figure 3 we show the results of a power-law fit to CTA data, plotted as amplitude vs photon

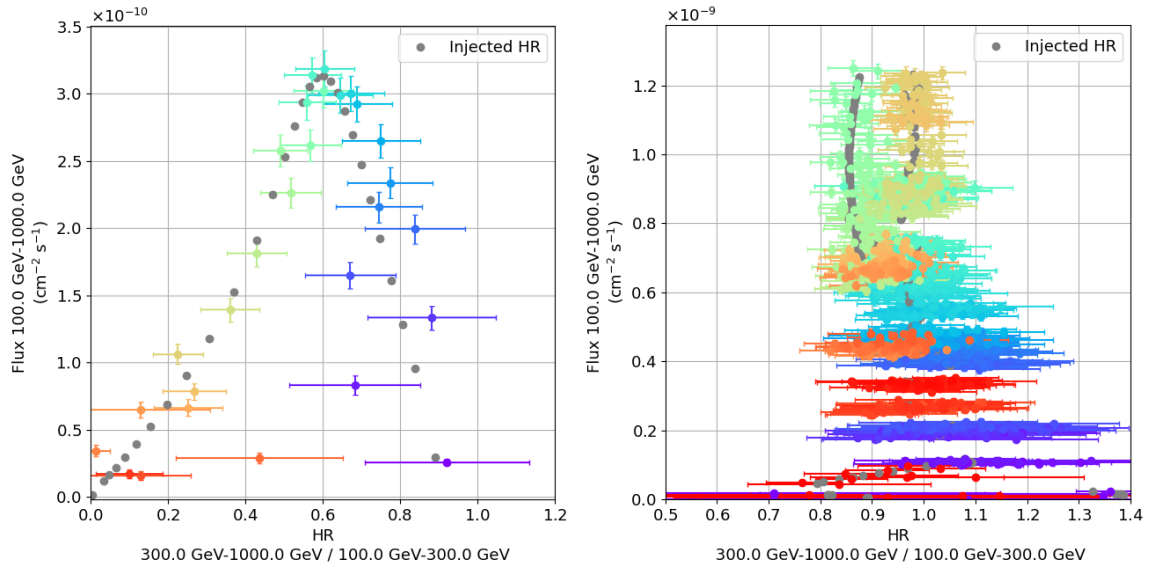


**Figure 2:** Simulated CTA light-curves, expressed as differential flux. Left: model A; Right: model B (see text for details).



**Figure 3:** Differential flux versus best-fit power-law index. Left: model A; Right: model B (see text for details).

index: these simulations indicate that model A has intrinsic spectral variability that can be detected by CTA; on the other hand model B shows weaker spectral variability in the CTA data. As an alternative to this visualization plot, we also produce two hardness-ratio plots, which is a common display tool in X-ray astronomy: in Figure 4 we show the evolution of the integral flux as a function of the hardness ratio between a high and low CTA energy band. Here as well we clearly observe the hysteresis cycle in the CTA data for model A.



**Figure 4:** Hardness-ratio plot: flux in the low-energy band vs the hard/soft flux ratio. Left: model A; Right: model B (see text for details).

#### 4. Conclusions

CTA will provide unprecedented sensitivity in the VHE band, giving us access to much increased statistical sample on blazar flares compared to current IACTs. In this contribution we have shown two simulated CTA light-curves on bright blazar flares, taking as input two different state-of-the-art numerical models. The preliminary results indicate that CTA might be able to detect, for the first time, hysteresis cycles in the VHE band, if they are indeed produced by the acceleration and radiative processes at work in the jet. This will give us a new observable to further constrain theoretical models. The results presented here are a small sub-set of the simulations that we are currently performing.

#### Acknowledgments

Please see the full CTA acknowledgments at [https://www.cta-observatory.org/consortium\\_acknowledgments/](https://www.cta-observatory.org/consortium_acknowledgments/)

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# The CTA Consortium

K. Abe<sup>1</sup>, S. Abe<sup>2</sup>, A. Acharyya<sup>3</sup>, R. Adam<sup>4,5</sup>, A. Aguasca-Cabot<sup>6</sup>, I. Agudo<sup>7</sup>, J. Alfaro<sup>8</sup>, N. Alvarez-Crespo<sup>9</sup>, R. Alves Batista<sup>10</sup>, J.-P. Amans<sup>11</sup>, E. Amato<sup>12</sup>, F. Ambrosino<sup>13</sup>, E. O. Angüner<sup>14</sup>, L. A. Antonelli<sup>13</sup>, C. Aramo<sup>15</sup>, C. Arcaro<sup>16</sup>, L. Arrabito<sup>17</sup>, K. Asano<sup>2</sup>, J. Aschersleben<sup>18</sup>, H. Ashkar<sup>5</sup>, L. Augusto Stuaní<sup>19</sup>, D. Baack<sup>20</sup>, M. Backes<sup>21,22</sup>, C. Balazs<sup>23</sup>, M. Balbo<sup>24</sup>, A. Baquero Larriva<sup>9,25</sup>, V. Barbosa Martins<sup>26</sup>, U. Barres de Almeida<sup>27,28</sup>, J. A. Barrio<sup>9</sup>, D. Bastieri<sup>29</sup>, P. I. Batista<sup>26</sup>, I. Batkovic<sup>29</sup>, R. Batzofin<sup>30</sup>, J. Baxter<sup>2</sup>, G. Beck<sup>31</sup>, J. Becker Tjus<sup>32</sup>, L. Beiske<sup>20</sup>, D. Belardinelli<sup>33</sup>, W. Benbow<sup>34</sup>, E. Bernardini<sup>29</sup>, J. Bernete Medrano<sup>35</sup>, K. Bernlöhr<sup>36</sup>, A. Berti<sup>37</sup>, V. Beshley<sup>38</sup>, P. Bhattacharjee<sup>39</sup>, S. Bhattacharyya<sup>40</sup>, B. Bi<sup>41</sup>, N. Biederbeck<sup>20</sup>, A. Biland<sup>42</sup>, E. Bissaldi<sup>43,44</sup>, O. Blanch<sup>45</sup>, J. Blazek<sup>46</sup>, C. Boisson<sup>11</sup>, J. Bolmont<sup>47</sup>, G. Bonnoli<sup>48,49</sup>, P. Bordas<sup>6</sup>, Z. Bosnjak<sup>50</sup>, F. Bradascio<sup>51</sup>, C. Braiding<sup>52</sup>, E. Bronzini<sup>53</sup>, R. Brose<sup>54</sup>, A. M. Brown<sup>55</sup>, F. Brun<sup>51</sup>, G. Brunelli<sup>53,7</sup>, A. Bulgarelli<sup>53</sup>, I. Burelli<sup>56</sup>, L. Burmistrov<sup>57</sup>, M. Burton<sup>58,59</sup>, T. Bylund<sup>60</sup>, P. G. Calisse<sup>61</sup>, A. Campoy-Ordaz<sup>62</sup>, B. K. Cantlay<sup>63,64</sup>, M. Capalbi<sup>65</sup>, A. Caproni<sup>66</sup>, R. Capuzzo-Dolcetta<sup>13</sup>, C. Carille<sup>67</sup>, S. Caroff<sup>39</sup>, A. Carosi<sup>13</sup>, R. Carosi<sup>49</sup>, M.-S. Carrasco<sup>68</sup>, E. Cascone<sup>69</sup>, F. Cassol<sup>68</sup>, N. Castrejón<sup>70</sup>, F. Catalani<sup>71</sup>, D. Cerasole<sup>72</sup>, M. Cerruti<sup>73</sup>, S. Chaty<sup>73</sup>, A. W. Chen<sup>31</sup>, M. Chernyakova<sup>74</sup>, A. Chiavassa<sup>75,76</sup>, J. Chudoba<sup>46</sup>, C. H. Coimbra Araujo<sup>77</sup>, V. Conforti<sup>53</sup>, F. Conte<sup>36</sup>, J. L. Contreras<sup>9</sup>, C. Cossou<sup>60</sup>, A. Costa<sup>78</sup>, H. Costantini<sup>68</sup>, P. Cristofari<sup>11</sup>, O. Cuevas<sup>79</sup>, Z. Curtis-Ginsberg<sup>80</sup>, G. D'Amico<sup>81</sup>, F. D'Ammando<sup>82</sup>, M. Dadina<sup>53</sup>, M. Dalchenko<sup>57</sup>, L. David<sup>26</sup>, I. D. Davids<sup>21</sup>, F. Dazzi<sup>83</sup>, A. De Angelis<sup>29</sup>, M. de Bony de Lavergne<sup>60</sup>, V. De Caprio<sup>69</sup>, G. De Cesare<sup>53</sup>, E. M. de Gouveia Dal Pino<sup>28</sup>, B. De Lotto<sup>56</sup>, M. De Lucia<sup>15</sup>, R. de Menezes<sup>75,76</sup>, M. de Naurois<sup>5</sup>, E. de Ona Wilhelmi<sup>26</sup>, N. De Simone<sup>26</sup>, V. de Souza<sup>19</sup>, L. del Peral<sup>70</sup>, M. V. del Valle<sup>28</sup>, E. Delagnes<sup>84</sup>, A. G. Delgado Giler<sup>19,18</sup>, C. Delgado<sup>35</sup>, M. Dell'aiera<sup>39</sup>, R. Della Ceca<sup>48</sup>, M. Della Valle<sup>69</sup>, D. della Volpe<sup>57</sup>, D. Depaoli<sup>36</sup>, A. Dettlaff<sup>37</sup>, T. Di Girolamo<sup>85,15</sup>, A. Di Piano<sup>53</sup>, F. Di Pierro<sup>75</sup>, R. Di Tria<sup>72</sup>, L. Di Venere<sup>44</sup>, C. Díaz-Bahamondes<sup>8</sup>, C. Dib<sup>86</sup>, S. Diebold<sup>41</sup>, R. Dima<sup>29</sup>, A. Dinesh<sup>9</sup>, A. Djannati-Atai<sup>73</sup>, J. Djuvsland<sup>81</sup>, A. Domínguez<sup>9</sup>, R. M. Dominik<sup>20</sup>, A. Donini<sup>13</sup>, D. Dorner<sup>87,42</sup>, J. Dörner<sup>32</sup>, M. Doro<sup>29</sup>, R. D. C. dos Anjos<sup>77</sup>, J.-L. Dournaux<sup>11</sup>, D. Dravins<sup>67</sup>, C. Duangchan<sup>88,64</sup>, C. Dubos<sup>89</sup>, L. Ducci<sup>41</sup>, V. V. Dwarkadas<sup>90</sup>, J. Ebr<sup>46</sup>, C. Eckner<sup>39,91</sup>, K. Egberts<sup>30</sup>, S. Einecke<sup>52</sup>, D. Elsässer<sup>20</sup>, G. Emery<sup>68</sup>, M. Escobar Godoy<sup>92</sup>, J. Escudero<sup>7</sup>, P. Esposito<sup>93,94</sup>, D. Falceta-Goncalves<sup>95</sup>, V. Fallah Ramazani<sup>32</sup>, A. Faure<sup>17</sup>, E. Fedorova<sup>13,96</sup>, S. Fegan<sup>5</sup>, K. Feijen<sup>73</sup>, Q. Feng<sup>34</sup>, G. Ferrand<sup>97,98</sup>, F. Ferrarotto<sup>99</sup>, E. Fiandrini<sup>100</sup>, A. Fiasson<sup>39</sup>, V. Fioretti<sup>53</sup>, L. Foffano<sup>101</sup>, L. Font Guiteras<sup>62</sup>, G. Fontaine<sup>5</sup>, S. Fröse<sup>20</sup>, S. Fukami<sup>42</sup>, Y. Fukui<sup>102</sup>, S. Funk<sup>88</sup>, D. Gaggero<sup>49</sup>, G. Galanti<sup>94</sup>, G. Galaz<sup>8</sup>, Y. A. Gallant<sup>17</sup>, S. Gallozzi<sup>13</sup>, V. Gammaldi<sup>10</sup>, C. Gasbarra<sup>33</sup>, M. Gaug<sup>62</sup>, A. Ghalumyan<sup>103</sup>, F. Gianotti<sup>53</sup>, M. Giarrusso<sup>104</sup>, N. Giglietto<sup>43,44</sup>, F. Giordano<sup>72</sup>, A. Giuliani<sup>94</sup>, J.-F. Glicenstein<sup>51</sup>, J. Glombitza<sup>88</sup>, P. Goldoni<sup>105</sup>, J. M. González<sup>106</sup>, M. M. González<sup>107</sup>, J. Goulart Coelho<sup>108</sup>, J. Granot<sup>109,110</sup>, D. Grasso<sup>49</sup>, R. Grau<sup>45</sup>, D. Green<sup>37</sup>, J. G. Green<sup>37</sup>, T. Greenshaw<sup>111</sup>, G. Grolleron<sup>47</sup>, J. Grube<sup>112</sup>, O. Gueta<sup>26</sup>, S. Gunji<sup>113</sup>, D. Hadasch<sup>2</sup>, P. Hamal<sup>46</sup>, W. Hanlon<sup>34</sup>, S. Hara<sup>114</sup>, V. M. Harvey<sup>52</sup>, K. Hashiyama<sup>2</sup>, T. Hassan<sup>35</sup>, M. Heller<sup>57</sup>, S. Hernández Cadena<sup>107</sup>, J. Hie<sup>115</sup>, N. Hiroshima<sup>2</sup>, B. Hnatyk<sup>96</sup>, R. Hnatyk<sup>96</sup>, D. Hoffmann<sup>68</sup>, W. Hofmann<sup>36</sup>, M. Holler<sup>116</sup>, D. Horan<sup>5</sup>, P. Horvath<sup>117</sup>, T. Hovatta<sup>118</sup>, D. Hrupec<sup>119</sup>, S. Hussain<sup>28,120</sup>, M. Iarlori<sup>121</sup>, T. Inada<sup>2</sup>, F. Incardona<sup>78</sup>, Y. Inoue<sup>2</sup>, S. Inoue<sup>98</sup>, F. Iocco<sup>85,15</sup>, K. Ishio<sup>122</sup>, M. Jamrozny<sup>123</sup>, P. Janecek<sup>46</sup>, F. Jankowsky<sup>124</sup>, C. Jarnot<sup>115</sup>, P. Jean<sup>115</sup>, I. Jiménez Martínez<sup>35</sup>, W. Jin<sup>3</sup>, L. Jocou<sup>125</sup>, C. Juramy-Gilles<sup>47</sup>, J. Jurysek<sup>46</sup>, O. Kalekin<sup>88</sup>, D. Kantzas<sup>91</sup>, V. Karas<sup>126</sup>, S. Kaufmann<sup>55</sup>, D. Kerszberg<sup>45</sup>, B. Khélifi<sup>73</sup>, D. B. Kieda<sup>127</sup>, T. Kleiner<sup>26</sup>, W. Kluźniak<sup>128</sup>, Y. Kobayashi<sup>2</sup>, K. Kohri<sup>129</sup>, N. Komin<sup>31</sup>, P. Kornecki<sup>11</sup>, K. Kosack<sup>60</sup>, H. Kubo<sup>2</sup>, J. Kushida<sup>1</sup>, A. La Barbera<sup>65</sup>, N. La Palombara<sup>94</sup>, M. Láinez<sup>9</sup>, A. Lamastra<sup>13</sup>, J. Lapington<sup>130</sup>, S. Lazarević<sup>131</sup>, J. Lazendic-Galloway<sup>23</sup>, S. Leach<sup>130</sup>, M. Lemoine-Goumard<sup>132</sup>, J.-P. Lenain<sup>47</sup>, G. Leto<sup>78</sup>, F. Leuschner<sup>41</sup>, E. Lindfors<sup>118</sup>, M. Linhoff<sup>20</sup>, I. Lioudakis<sup>118</sup>, L. Loïc<sup>51</sup>, S. Lombardi<sup>13</sup>, F. Longo<sup>133</sup>, R. López-Coto<sup>7</sup>, M. López-Moya<sup>9</sup>, A. López-Oramas<sup>134</sup>, S. Loporchio<sup>43,44</sup>, J. Lozano Bahilo<sup>70</sup>, P. L. Luque-Escamilla<sup>135</sup>, O. Macias<sup>136</sup>, G. Maier<sup>26</sup>, P. Majumdar<sup>137</sup>, D. Malyshev<sup>41</sup>, D. Malyshev<sup>88</sup>, D. Mandat<sup>46</sup>, G. Manicò<sup>104,138</sup>, P. Marinos<sup>52</sup>, S. Markoff<sup>136</sup>, I. Márquez<sup>7</sup>, P. Marquez<sup>45</sup>, G. Marsella<sup>139,104</sup>, J. Martí<sup>135</sup>, P. Martin<sup>115</sup>

G. A. Martínez<sup>35</sup>, M. Martínez<sup>45</sup>, O. Martinez<sup>140,141</sup>, C. Marty<sup>115</sup>, A. Mas-Aguilar<sup>9</sup>, M. Mastropietro<sup>13</sup>, G. Maurin<sup>39</sup>, W. Max-Moerbeck<sup>142</sup>, D. Mazin<sup>2,37</sup>, D. Melkumyan<sup>26</sup>, S. Menchiarì<sup>12,49</sup>, E. Mestre<sup>143</sup>, J.-L. Meunier<sup>47</sup>, D. M.-A. Meyer<sup>30</sup>, D. Miceli<sup>16</sup>, M. Michailidis<sup>41</sup>, J. Michałowski<sup>144</sup>, T. Miener<sup>9</sup>, J. M. Miranda<sup>140,145</sup>, A. Mitchell<sup>88</sup>, M. Mizote<sup>146</sup>, T. Mizuno<sup>147</sup>, R. Moderski<sup>128</sup>, L. Mohrmann<sup>36</sup>, M. Molero<sup>134</sup>, C. Molfese<sup>83</sup>, E. Molina<sup>134</sup>, T. Montaruli<sup>57</sup>, A. Moralejo<sup>45</sup>, D. Morcuende<sup>9,7</sup>, K. Morik<sup>20</sup>, A. Morselli<sup>33</sup>, E. Moulin<sup>51</sup>, V. Moya Zamanillo<sup>9</sup>, R. Mukherjee<sup>148</sup>, K. Munari<sup>78</sup>, A. Muraczewski<sup>128</sup>, H. Muraishi<sup>149</sup>, T. Nakamori<sup>113</sup>, L. Nava<sup>48</sup>, A. Nayak<sup>55</sup>, R. Nemmen<sup>28,150</sup>, L. Nickel<sup>20</sup>, J. Niemiec<sup>144</sup>, D. Nieto<sup>9</sup>, M. Nieves Rosillo<sup>134</sup>, M. Nikolažuk<sup>151</sup>, K. Nishijima<sup>1</sup>, K. Noda<sup>2</sup>, D. Nosek<sup>152</sup>, B. Novosyadlyj<sup>153</sup>, V. Novotny<sup>152</sup>, S. Nozaki<sup>37</sup>, P. O'Brien<sup>130</sup>, M. Ohishi<sup>2</sup>, Y. Ohtani<sup>2</sup>, A. Okumura<sup>154,155</sup>, J.-F. Olive<sup>115</sup>, B. Olmi<sup>156,12</sup>, R. A. Ong<sup>157</sup>, M. Orienti<sup>82</sup>, R. Orito<sup>158</sup>, M. Orlandini<sup>53</sup>, E. Orlando<sup>133</sup>, M. Ostrowski<sup>123</sup>, N. Otte<sup>159</sup>, I. Oya<sup>61</sup>, I. Pagano<sup>78</sup>, A. Pagliaro<sup>65</sup>, M. Palatiello<sup>56</sup>, G. Panebianco<sup>53</sup>, J. M. Paredes<sup>6</sup>, N. Parmiggiani<sup>53</sup>, S. R. Patel<sup>89</sup>, B. Patricelli<sup>13,160</sup>, D. Pavlović<sup>161</sup>, A. Pe'er<sup>37</sup>, M. Pech<sup>46</sup>, M. Pecimotika<sup>161,162</sup>, M. Peresano<sup>76,75</sup>, J. Pérez-Romero<sup>10,40</sup>, G. Peron<sup>73</sup>, M. Persic<sup>163,164</sup>, P.-O. Petrucci<sup>125</sup>, O. Petruk<sup>38</sup>, F. Pfeifle<sup>87</sup>, F. Pintore<sup>65</sup>, G. Pirola<sup>37</sup>, C. Pittori<sup>13</sup>, C. Plard<sup>39</sup>, F. Podobnik<sup>165</sup>, M. Pohl<sup>30,26</sup>, E. Pons<sup>39</sup>, E. Prandini<sup>29</sup>, J. Prast<sup>39</sup>, G. Principe<sup>133</sup>, C. Priyadarshi<sup>45</sup>, N. Produit<sup>46</sup>, D. Prokhorov<sup>136</sup>, E. Puschel<sup>26</sup>, G. Pühlhofer<sup>41</sup>, M. L. Pumo<sup>138,104</sup>, M. Punch<sup>73</sup>, A. Quirrenbach<sup>124</sup>, S. Rainò<sup>72</sup>, N. Randazzo<sup>104</sup>, R. Rando<sup>29</sup>, T. Ravel<sup>115</sup>, S. Razzaque<sup>166,110</sup>, M. Regeard<sup>73</sup>, P. Reichherzer<sup>167,32</sup>, A. Reimer<sup>116</sup>, O. Reimer<sup>116</sup>, A. Reisenegger<sup>8,168</sup>, T. Reposeur<sup>132</sup>, B. Reville<sup>36</sup>, W. Rhode<sup>20</sup>, M. Ribó<sup>6</sup>, T. Richtler<sup>169</sup>, F. Rieger<sup>36</sup>, E. Roache<sup>34</sup>, G. Rodriguez Fernandez<sup>33</sup>, M. D. Rodríguez Frías<sup>70</sup>, J. J. Rodríguez-Vázquez<sup>35</sup>, P. Romano<sup>48</sup>, G. Romeo<sup>78</sup>, J. Rosado<sup>9</sup>, G. Rowell<sup>52</sup>, B. Rudak<sup>128</sup>, A. J. Ruiter<sup>170</sup>, C. B. Rulten<sup>55</sup>, F. Russo<sup>53</sup>, I. Sadeh<sup>26</sup>, L. Saha<sup>34</sup>, T. Saito<sup>2</sup>, S. Sakurai<sup>2</sup>, H. Salzmann<sup>41</sup>, D. Sanchez<sup>39</sup>, M. Sánchez-Conde<sup>10</sup>, P. Sangiorgi<sup>65</sup>, H. Sano<sup>2</sup>, M. Santander<sup>3</sup>, A. Santangelo<sup>41</sup>, R. Santos-Lima<sup>28</sup>, A. Sanuy<sup>6</sup>, T. Šarić<sup>171</sup>, A. Sarkar<sup>26</sup>, S. Sarkar<sup>167</sup>, F. G. Saturni<sup>13</sup>, V. Savchenko<sup>172</sup>, A. Scherer<sup>8</sup>, P. Schipani<sup>69</sup>, B. Schleicher<sup>87,42</sup>, P. Schovaneck<sup>46</sup>, J. L. Schubert<sup>20</sup>, F. Schussler<sup>51</sup>, U. Schwanke<sup>173</sup>, G. Schwefer<sup>36</sup>, S. Scuderi<sup>94</sup>, M. Seglar Arroyo<sup>45</sup>, I. Seitenzahl<sup>170</sup>, O. Sergijenko<sup>96,174,175</sup>, V. Sguera<sup>53</sup>, R. Y. Shang<sup>157</sup>, P. Sharma<sup>89</sup>, G. D. S. SIDIBE<sup>84</sup>, L. Sidoli<sup>94</sup>, H. Siejkowski<sup>176</sup>, C. Siqueira<sup>19</sup>, P. Sizun<sup>84</sup>, V. Sliusar<sup>24</sup>, A. Slowikowska<sup>177</sup>, H. Sol<sup>11</sup>, A. Specovius<sup>88</sup>, S. T. Spencer<sup>88,167</sup>, D. Spiga<sup>48</sup>, A. Stamerra<sup>13,178</sup>, S. Stanić<sup>40</sup>, T. Starecki<sup>179</sup>, R. Starling<sup>130</sup>, C. Steppa<sup>30</sup>, T. Stolarczyk<sup>60</sup>, J. Strišković<sup>119</sup>, M. Strzys<sup>2</sup>, Y. Suda<sup>180</sup>, T. Suomijärvi<sup>89</sup>, D. Tak<sup>26</sup>, M. Takahashi<sup>154</sup>, R. Takeishi<sup>2</sup>, P.-H. T. Tam<sup>2,181</sup>, S. J. Tanaka<sup>182</sup>, T. Tanaka<sup>146</sup>, K. Terauchi<sup>183</sup>, V. Testa<sup>13</sup>, L. Tibaldo<sup>115</sup>, O. Tibolla<sup>55</sup>, F. Torradeflot<sup>184,35</sup>, D. F. Torres<sup>143</sup>, E. Torresi<sup>53</sup>, N. Tothill<sup>131</sup>, F. Toussanel<sup>47</sup>, V. Touzard<sup>115</sup>, A. Tramacere<sup>24</sup>, P. Travnicek<sup>46</sup>, G. Tripodo<sup>139,104</sup>, S. Truzzi<sup>165</sup>, A. Tsiachina<sup>115</sup>, A. Tutone<sup>65</sup>, M. Vacula<sup>117,46</sup>, B. Vallage<sup>51</sup>, P. Vallania<sup>75,185</sup>, R. Vallés<sup>143</sup>, C. van Eldik<sup>88</sup>, J. van Scherpenberg<sup>37</sup>, J. Vandenbroucke<sup>80</sup>, V. Vassiliev<sup>157</sup>, P. Venault<sup>84</sup>, S. Ventura<sup>165</sup>, S. Vercellone<sup>48</sup>, G. Verna<sup>165</sup>, A. Viana<sup>19</sup>, N. Viaux<sup>186</sup>, A. Vigliano<sup>56</sup>, J. Vignatti<sup>86</sup>, C. F. Vigorito<sup>75,76</sup>, V. Vitale<sup>33</sup>, V. Vodeb<sup>40</sup>, V. Voisin<sup>47</sup>, S. Vorobiov<sup>40</sup>, G. Voutsinas<sup>57</sup>, I. Vovk<sup>2</sup>, V. Waeghebaert<sup>115</sup>, S. J. Wagner<sup>124</sup>, R. Walter<sup>24</sup>, M. Ward<sup>55</sup>, M. Wechakama<sup>63,64</sup>, R. White<sup>36</sup>, A. Wierzcholska<sup>144</sup>, M. Will<sup>37</sup>, D. A. Williams<sup>92</sup>, F. Wohlleben<sup>36</sup>, A. Wolter<sup>48</sup>, T. Yamamoto<sup>146</sup>, R. Yamazaki<sup>182</sup>, L. Yang<sup>166,181</sup>, T. Yoshida<sup>187</sup>, T. Yoshikoshi<sup>2</sup>, M. Zacharias<sup>124,22</sup>, R. Zanmar Sanchez<sup>78</sup>, D. Zavrtnik<sup>40</sup>, M. Zavrtnik<sup>40</sup>, A. A. Zdziarski<sup>128</sup>, A. Zech<sup>11</sup>, V. I. Zhdanov<sup>96</sup>, K. Ziętara<sup>123</sup>, M. Živec<sup>40</sup>, J. Zuriaga-Puig<sup>10</sup>



## Affiliations

- <sup>1</sup> Department of Physics, Tokai University, 4-1-1, Kita-Kaname, Hiratsuka, Kanagawa 259-1292, Japan
- <sup>2</sup> Institute for Cosmic Ray Research, University of Tokyo, 5-1-5, Kashiwa-no-ha, Kashiwa, Chiba 277-8582, Japan
- <sup>3</sup> University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Department of Physics and Astronomy, Gallalee Hall, Box 870324 Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0324, USA
- <sup>4</sup> Université Côte d'Azur, Observatoire de la Côte d'Azur, CNRS, Laboratoire Lagrange, France
- <sup>5</sup> Laboratoire Leprince-Ringuet, CNRS/IN2P3, École polytechnique, Institut Polytechnique de Paris, 91120 Palaiseau, France
- <sup>6</sup> Departament de Física Quàntica i Astrofísica, Institut de Ciències del Cosmos, Universitat de Barcelona, IEEC-UB, Martí i Franquès, 1, 08028, Barcelona, Spain
- <sup>7</sup> Instituto de Astrofísica de Andalucía-CSIC, Glorieta de la Astronomía s/n, 18008, Granada, Spain
- <sup>8</sup> Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Av. Libertador Bernardo O'Higgins 340, Santiago, Chile
- <sup>9</sup> IPARCOS-UCM, Instituto de Física de Partículas y del Cosmos, and EMFTEL Department, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, E-28040 Madrid, Spain
- <sup>10</sup> Instituto de Física Teórica UAM/CSIC and Departamento de Física Teórica, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, c/ Nicolás Cabrera 13-15, Campus de Cantoblanco UAM, 28049 Madrid, Spain
- <sup>11</sup> LUTH, GEPI and LERMA, Observatoire de Paris, Université PSL, Université Paris Cité, CNRS, 5 place Jules Janssen, 92190, Meudon, France
- <sup>12</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astrofisico di Arcetri, Largo E. Fermi, 5 - 50125 Firenze, Italy
- <sup>13</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astronomico di Roma, Via di Frascati 33, 00040, Monteporzio Catone, Italy
- <sup>14</sup> TÜBİTAK Research Institute for Fundamental Sciences, 41470 Gebze, Kocaeli, Turkey
- <sup>15</sup> INFN Sezione di Napoli, Via Cintia, ed. G, 80126 Napoli, Italy
- <sup>16</sup> INFN Sezione di Padova, Via Marzolo 8, 35131 Padova, Italy
- <sup>17</sup> Laboratoire Univers et Particules de Montpellier, Université de Montpellier, CNRS/IN2P3, CC 72, Place Eugène Bataillon, F-34095 Montpellier Cedex 5, France
- <sup>18</sup> Kapteyn Astronomical Institute, University of Groningen, Landleven 12, 9747 AD, Groningen, The Netherlands
- <sup>19</sup> Instituto de Física de São Carlos, Universidade de São Paulo, Av. Trabalhador São-carlense, 400 - CEP 13566-590, São Carlos, SP, Brazil
- <sup>20</sup> Astroparticle Physics, Department of Physics, TU Dortmund University, Otto-Hahn-Str. 4a, 44227 Dortmund, Germany
- <sup>21</sup> Department of Physics, Chemistry & Material Science, University of Namibia, Private Bag 13301, Windhoek, Namibia
- <sup>22</sup> Centre for Space Research, North-West University, Potchefstroom, 2520, South Africa
- <sup>23</sup> School of Physics and Astronomy, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria 3800, Australia
- <sup>24</sup> Department of Astronomy, University of Geneva, Chemin d'Ecogia 16, CH-1290 Versoix, Switzerland
- <sup>25</sup> Faculty of Science and Technology, Universidad del Azuay, Cuenca, Ecuador.
- <sup>26</sup> Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, Platanenallee 6, 15738 Zeuthen, Germany
- <sup>27</sup> Centro Brasileiro de Pesquisas Físicas, Rua Xavier Sigaud 150, RJ 22290-180, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- <sup>28</sup> Instituto de Astronomia, Geofísica e Ciências Atmosféricas - Universidade de São Paulo, Cidade Universitária, R. do Matão, 1226, CEP 05508-090, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
- <sup>29</sup> INFN Sezione di Padova and Università degli Studi di Padova, Via Marzolo 8, 35131 Padova, Italy
- <sup>30</sup> Institut für Physik & Astronomie, Universität Potsdam, Karl-Liebknecht-Strasse 24/25, 14476 Potsdam, Germany

- <sup>31</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Braamfontein, 2000 Johannesburg, South Africa
- <sup>32</sup> Institut für Theoretische Physik, Lehrstuhl IV: Plasma-Astroteilchenphysik, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Universitätsstraße 150, 44801 Bochum, Germany
- <sup>33</sup> INFN Sezione di Roma Tor Vergata, Via della Ricerca Scientifica 1, 00133 Rome, Italy
- <sup>34</sup> Center for Astrophysics | Harvard & Smithsonian, 60 Garden St, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
- <sup>35</sup> CIEMAT, Avda. Complutense 40, 28040 Madrid, Spain
- <sup>36</sup> Max-Planck-Institut für Kernphysik, Saupfercheckweg 1, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany
- <sup>37</sup> Max-Planck-Institut für Physik, Föhringer Ring 6, 80805 München, Germany
- <sup>38</sup> Pidstryhach Institute for Applied Problems in Mechanics and Mathematics NASU, 3B Naukova Street, Lviv, 79060, Ukraine
- <sup>39</sup> Univ. Savoie Mont Blanc, CNRS, Laboratoire d'Annecy de Physique des Particules - IN2P3, 74000 Annecy, France
- <sup>40</sup> Center for Astrophysics and Cosmology (CAC), University of Nova Gorica, Nova Gorica, Slovenia
- <sup>41</sup> Institut für Astronomie und Astrophysik, Universität Tübingen, Sand 1, 72076 Tübingen, Germany
- <sup>42</sup> ETH Zürich, Institute for Particle Physics and Astrophysics, Otto-Stern-Weg 5, 8093 Zürich, Switzerland
- <sup>43</sup> Politecnico di Bari, via Orabona 4, 70124 Bari, Italy
- <sup>44</sup> INFN Sezione di Bari, via Orabona 4, 70126 Bari, Italy
- <sup>45</sup> Institut de Física d'Altes Energies (IFAE), The Barcelona Institute of Science and Technology, Campus UAB, 08193 Bellaterra (Barcelona), Spain
- <sup>46</sup> FZU - Institute of Physics of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Na Slovance 1999/2, 182 21 Praha 8, Czech Republic
- <sup>47</sup> Sorbonne Université, CNRS/IN2P3, Laboratoire de Physique Nucléaire et de Hautes Energies, LPNHE, 4 place Jussieu, 75005 Paris, France
- <sup>48</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astronomico di Brera, Via Brera 28, 20121 Milano, Italy
- <sup>49</sup> INFN Sezione di Pisa, Edificio C – Polo Fibonacci, Largo Bruno Pontecorvo 3, 56127 Pisa
- <sup>50</sup> University of Zagreb, Faculty of electrical engineering and computing, Unska 3, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
- <sup>51</sup> IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Bât 141, 91191 Gif-sur-Yvette, France
- <sup>52</sup> School of Physics, Chemistry and Earth Sciences, University of Adelaide, Adelaide SA 5005, Australia
- <sup>53</sup> INAF - Osservatorio di Astrofisica e Scienza dello spazio di Bologna, Via Piero Gobetti 93/3, 40129 Bologna, Italy
- <sup>54</sup> Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 31 Fitzwilliam Place, Dublin 2, Ireland
- <sup>55</sup> Centre for Advanced Instrumentation, Department of Physics, Durham University, South Road, Durham, DH1 3LE, United Kingdom
- <sup>56</sup> INFN Sezione di Trieste and Università degli Studi di Udine, Via delle Scienze 208, 33100 Udine, Italy
- <sup>57</sup> University of Geneva - Département de physique nucléaire et corpusculaire, 24 rue du Général-Dufour, 1211 Genève 4, Switzerland
- <sup>58</sup> Armagh Observatory and Planetarium, College Hill, Armagh BT61 9DG, United Kingdom
- <sup>59</sup> School of Physics, University of New South Wales, Sydney NSW 2052, Australia
- <sup>60</sup> Université Paris-Saclay, Université Paris Cité, CEA, CNRS, AIM, F-91191 Gif-sur-Yvette Cedex, France
- <sup>61</sup> Cherenkov Telescope Array Observatory, Saupfercheckweg 1, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany
- <sup>62</sup> Unitat de Física de les Radiacions, Departament de Física, and CERES-IEEC, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Edifici C3, Campus UAB, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain

- <sup>63</sup> Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, Kasetsart University, 50 Ngam Wong Wan Rd., Lat Yao, Chatuchak, Bangkok, 10900, Thailand
- <sup>64</sup> National Astronomical Research Institute of Thailand, 191 Huay Kaew Rd., Suthep, Muang, Chiang Mai, 50200, Thailand
- <sup>65</sup> INAF - Istituto di Astrofisica Spaziale e Fisica Cosmica di Palermo, Via U. La Malfa 153, 90146 Palermo, Italy
- <sup>66</sup> Universidade Cruzeiro do Sul, Núcleo de Astrofísica Teórica (NAT/UCS), Rua Galvão Bueno 8687, Bloco B, sala 16, Libertade 01506-000 - São Paulo, Brazil
- <sup>67</sup> Lund Observatory, Lund University, Box 43, SE-22100 Lund, Sweden
- <sup>68</sup> Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS/IN2P3, CPPM, Marseille, France
- <sup>69</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astronomico di Capodimonte, Via Salita Moiarriello 16, 80131 Napoli, Italy
- <sup>70</sup> Universidad de Alcalá - Space & Astroparticle group, Facultad de Ciencias, Campus Universitario Ctra. Madrid-Barcelona, Km. 33.600 28871 Alcalá de Henares (Madrid), Spain
- <sup>71</sup> Escola de Engenharia de Lorena, Universidade de São Paulo, Área I - Estrada Municipal do Campinho, s/n°, CEP 12602-810, Pte. Nova, Lorena, Brazil
- <sup>72</sup> INFN Sezione di Bari and Università degli Studi di Bari, via Orabona 4, 70124 Bari, Italy
- <sup>73</sup> Université Paris Cité, CNRS, Astroparticule et Cosmologie, F-75013 Paris, France
- <sup>74</sup> Dublin City University, Glasnevin, Dublin 9, Ireland
- <sup>75</sup> INFN Sezione di Torino, Via P. Giuria 1, 10125 Torino, Italy
- <sup>76</sup> Dipartimento di Fisica - Università degli Studi di Torino, Via Pietro Giuria 1 - 10125 Torino, Italy
- <sup>77</sup> Universidade Federal Do Paraná - Setor Palotina, Departamento de Engenharias e Exatas, Rua Pioneiro, 2153, Jardim Dallas, CEP: 85950-000 Palotina, Paraná, Brazil
- <sup>78</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astrofisico di Catania, Via S. Sofia, 78, 95123 Catania, Italy
- <sup>79</sup> Universidad de Valparaíso, Blanco 951, Valparaíso, Chile
- <sup>80</sup> University of Wisconsin, Madison, 500 Lincoln Drive, Madison, WI, 53706, USA
- <sup>81</sup> Department of Physics and Technology, University of Bergen, Museclass 1, 5007 Bergen, Norway
- <sup>82</sup> INAF - Istituto di Radioastronomia, Via Gobetti 101, 40129 Bologna, Italy
- <sup>83</sup> INAF - Istituto Nazionale di Astrofisica, Viale del Parco Mellini 84, 00136 Rome, Italy
- <sup>84</sup> IRFU/DEDIP, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Bat 141, 91191 Gif-sur-Yvette, France
- <sup>85</sup> Università degli Studi di Napoli "Federico II" - Dipartimento di Fisica "E. Pancini", Complesso universitario di Monte Sant'Angelo, Via Cintia - 80126 Napoli, Italy
- <sup>86</sup> CCTVal, Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, Avenida España 1680, Valparaíso, Chile
- <sup>87</sup> Institute for Theoretical Physics and Astrophysics, Universität Würzburg, Campus Hubland Nord, Emil-Fischer-Str. 31, 97074 Würzburg, Germany
- <sup>88</sup> Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Erlangen Centre for Astroparticle Physics, Nikolaus-Fiebiger-Str. 2, 91058 Erlangen, Germany
- <sup>89</sup> Université Paris-Saclay, CNRS/IN2P3, IJCLab, 91405 Orsay, France
- <sup>90</sup> Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics, University of Chicago, 5640 S Ellis Ave, Chicago, Illinois, 60637, USA
- <sup>91</sup> LAPTh, CNRS, USMB, F-74940 Annecy, France
- <sup>92</sup> Santa Cruz Institute for Particle Physics and Department of Physics, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA
- <sup>93</sup> University School for Advanced Studies IUSS Pavia, Palazzo del Broletto, Piazza della Vittoria 15, 27100 Pavia, Italy
- <sup>94</sup> INAF - Istituto di Astrofisica Spaziale e Fisica Cosmica di Milano, Via A. Corti 12, 20133 Milano, Italy

- <sup>95</sup> Escola de Artes, Ciências e Humanidades, Universidade de São Paulo, Rua Arlindo Bettio, CEP 03828-000, 1000 São Paulo, Brazil
- <sup>96</sup> Astronomical Observatory of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, 3 Observatorna Street, Kyiv, 04053, Ukraine
- <sup>97</sup> The University of Manitoba, Dept of Physics and Astronomy, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2, Canada
- <sup>98</sup> RIKEN, Institute of Physical and Chemical Research, 2-1 Hirosawa, Wako, Saitama, 351-0198, Japan
- <sup>99</sup> INFN Sezione di Roma La Sapienza, P.le Aldo Moro, 2 - 00185 Roma, Italy
- <sup>100</sup> INFN Sezione di Perugia and Università degli Studi di Perugia, Via A. Pascoli, 06123 Perugia, Italy
- <sup>101</sup> INAF - Istituto di Astrofisica e Planetologia Spaziali (IAPS), Via del Fosso del Cavaliere 100, 00133 Roma, Italy
- <sup>102</sup> Department of Physics, Nagoya University, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya, 464-8602, Japan
- <sup>103</sup> Alikhanyan National Science Laboratory, Yerevan Physics Institute, 2 Alikhanyan Brothers St., 0036, Yerevan, Armenia
- <sup>104</sup> INFN Sezione di Catania, Via S. Sofia 64, 95123 Catania, Italy
- <sup>105</sup> Université Paris Cité, CNRS, CEA, Astroparticule et Cosmologie, F-75013 Paris, France
- <sup>106</sup> Universidad Andres Bello, República 252, Santiago, Chile
- <sup>107</sup> Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Delegación Coyoacán, 04510 Ciudad de México, Mexico
- <sup>108</sup> Núcleo de Astrofísica e Cosmologia (Cosmo-ufes) & Departamento de Física, Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES), Av. Fernando Ferrari, 514. 29065-910. Vitória-ES, Brazil
- <sup>109</sup> Astrophysics Research Center of the Open University (ARCO), The Open University of Israel, P.O. Box 808, Ra'anana 4353701, Israel
- <sup>110</sup> Department of Physics, The George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052, USA
- <sup>111</sup> University of Liverpool, Oliver Lodge Laboratory, Liverpool L69 7ZE, United Kingdom
- <sup>112</sup> King's College London, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, United Kingdom
- <sup>113</sup> Department of Physics, Yamagata University, Yamagata, Yamagata 990-8560, Japan
- <sup>114</sup> Learning and Education Development Center, Yamanashi-Gakuin University, Kofu, Yamanashi 400-8575, Japan
- <sup>115</sup> IRAP, Université de Toulouse, CNRS, CNES, UPS, 9 avenue Colonel Roche, 31028 Toulouse, Cedex 4, France
- <sup>116</sup> Universität Innsbruck, Institut für Astro- und Teilchenphysik, Technikerstr. 25/8, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria
- <sup>117</sup> Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Science, Joint Laboratory of Optics of Palacký University and Institute of Physics of the Czech Academy of Sciences, 17. listopadu 1192/12, 779 00 Olomouc, Czech Republic
- <sup>118</sup> Finnish Centre for Astronomy with ESO, University of Turku, Finland, FI-20014 University of Turku, Finland
- <sup>119</sup> Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Trg Ljudevita Gaja 6, 31000 Osijek, Croatia
- <sup>120</sup> Gran Sasso Science Institute (GSSI), Viale Francesco Crispi 7, 67100 L'Aquila, Italy and INFN-Laboratori Nazionali del Gran Sasso (LNGS), via G. Acitelli 22, 67100 Assergi (AQ), Italy
- <sup>121</sup> Dipartimento di Scienze Fisiche e Chimiche, Università degli Studi dell'Aquila and GSGC-LNGS-INFN, Via Vetoio 1, L'Aquila, 67100, Italy
- <sup>122</sup> Faculty of Physics and Applied Computer Science, University of Łódź, ul. Pomorska 149-153, 90-236 Łódź, Poland
- <sup>123</sup> Astronomical Observatory, Jagiellonian University, ul. Orła 171, 30-244 Cracow, Poland
- <sup>124</sup> Landessternwarte, Zentrum für Astronomie der Universität Heidelberg, Königstuhl 12, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany
- <sup>125</sup> Univ. Grenoble Alpes, CNRS, IPAG, 414 rue de la Piscine, Domaine Universitaire, 38041 Grenoble Cedex 9, France

- <sup>126</sup> Astronomical Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Bocni II 1401 - 14100 Prague, Czech Republic
- <sup>127</sup> Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112-0830, USA
- <sup>128</sup> Nicolaus Copernicus Astronomical Center, Polish Academy of Sciences, ul. Bartycka 18, 00-716 Warsaw, Poland
- <sup>129</sup> Institute of Particle and Nuclear Studies, KEK (High Energy Accelerator Research Organization), 1-1 Oho, Tsukuba, 305-0801, Japan
- <sup>130</sup> School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Leicester, Leicester, LE1 7RH, United Kingdom
- <sup>131</sup> Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia
- <sup>132</sup> Université Bordeaux, CNRS, LP2I Bordeaux, UMR 5797, 19 Chemin du Solarium, F-33170 Gradignan, France
- <sup>133</sup> INFN Sezione di Trieste and Università degli Studi di Trieste, Via Valerio 2 I, 34127 Trieste, Italy
- <sup>134</sup> Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias and Departamento de Astrofísica, Universidad de La Laguna, La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain
- <sup>135</sup> Escuela Politécnica Superior de Jaén, Universidad de Jaén, Campus Las Lagunillas s/n, Edif. A3, 23071 Jaén, Spain
- <sup>136</sup> Anton Pannekoek Institute/GRAPPA, University of Amsterdam, Science Park 904 1098 XH Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- <sup>137</sup> Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, A CI of Homi Bhabha National Institute, Kolkata 700064, West Bengal, India
- <sup>138</sup> Università degli studi di Catania, Dipartimento di Fisica e Astronomia “Ettore Majorana”, Via S. Sofia 64, 95123 Catania, Italy
- <sup>139</sup> Dipartimento di Fisica e Chimica “E. Segrè”, Università degli Studi di Palermo, Via Archirafi 36, 90123, Palermo, Italy
- <sup>140</sup> UCM-ELEC group, EMFTEL Department, University Complutense of Madrid, 28040 Madrid, Spain
- <sup>141</sup> Departamento de Ingeniería Eléctrica, Universidad Pontificia de Comillas - ICAI, 28015 Madrid
- <sup>142</sup> Universidad de Chile, Av. Libertador Bernardo O’Higgins 1058, Santiago, Chile
- <sup>143</sup> Institute of Space Sciences (ICE, CSIC), and Institut d’Estudis Espacials de Catalunya (IEEC), and Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA), Campus UAB, Carrer de Can Magrans, s/n 08193 Cerdanyola del Vallés, Spain
- <sup>144</sup> The Henryk Niewodniczański Institute of Nuclear Physics, Polish Academy of Sciences, ul. Radzikowskiego 152, 31-342 Cracow, Poland
- <sup>145</sup> IPARCOS Institute, Faculty of Physics (UCM), 28040 Madrid, Spain
- <sup>146</sup> Department of Physics, Konan University, Kobe, Hyogo, 658-8501, Japan
- <sup>147</sup> Hiroshima Astrophysical Science Center, Hiroshima University, Higashi-Hiroshima, Hiroshima 739-8526, Japan
- <sup>148</sup> Department of Physics, Columbia University, 538 West 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, USA
- <sup>149</sup> School of Allied Health Sciences, Kitasato University, Sagamihara, Kanagawa 228-8555, Japan
- <sup>150</sup> Kavli Institute for Particle Astrophysics and Cosmology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA
- <sup>151</sup> University of Białystok, Faculty of Physics, ul. K. Ciołkowskiego 1L, 15-245 Białystok, Poland
- <sup>152</sup> Charles University, Institute of Particle & Nuclear Physics, V Holešovičkách 2, 180 00 Prague 8, Czech Republic
- <sup>153</sup> Astronomical Observatory of Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, 8 Kyryla i Mephodia Street, Lviv, 79005, Ukraine
- <sup>154</sup> Institute for Space—Earth Environmental Research, Nagoya University, Furo-cho, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya 464-8601, Japan
- <sup>155</sup> Kobayashi—Maskawa Institute for the Origin of Particles and the Universe, Nagoya University, Furo-cho, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya 464-8602, Japan
- <sup>156</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astronomico di Palermo “G.S. Vaiiana”, Piazza del Parlamento 1, 90134 Palermo, Italy

- <sup>157</sup> Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA
- <sup>158</sup> Graduate School of Technology, Industrial and Social Sciences, Tokushima University, Tokushima 770-8506, Japan
- <sup>159</sup> School of Physics & Center for Relativistic Astrophysics, Georgia Institute of Technology, 837 State Street, Atlanta, Georgia, 30332-0430, USA
- <sup>160</sup> University of Pisa, Largo B. Pontecorvo 3, 56127 Pisa, Italy
- <sup>161</sup> University of Rijeka, Faculty of Physics, Radmile Matejčić 2, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia
- <sup>162</sup> Rudjer Boskovic Institute, Bijenicka 54, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia
- <sup>163</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astronomico di Padova, Vicolo dell'Osservatorio 5, 35122 Padova, Italy
- <sup>164</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astronomico di Padova and INFN Sezione di Trieste, gr. coll. Udine, Via delle Scienze 208 I-33100 Udine, Italy
- <sup>165</sup> INFN and Università degli Studi di Siena, Dipartimento di Scienze Fisiche, della Terra e dell'Ambiente (DSFTA), Sezione di Fisica, Via Roma 56, 53100 Siena, Italy
- <sup>166</sup> Centre for Astro-Particle Physics (CAPP) and Department of Physics, University of Johannesburg, PO Box 524, Auckland Park 2006, South Africa
- <sup>167</sup> University of Oxford, Department of Physics, Clarendon Laboratory, Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3PU, United Kingdom
- <sup>168</sup> Departamento de Física, Facultad de Ciencias Básicas, Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación, Avenida José Pedro Alessandri 774, Ñuñoa, Santiago, Chile
- <sup>169</sup> Departamento de Astronomía, Universidad de Concepción, Barrio Universitario S/N, Concepción, Chile
- <sup>170</sup> University of New South Wales, School of Science, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia
- <sup>171</sup> University of Split - FESB, R. Boskovicica 32, 21 000 Split, Croatia
- <sup>172</sup> EPFL Laboratoire d'astrophysique, Observatoire de Sauverny, CH-1290 Versoix, Switzerland
- <sup>173</sup> Department of Physics, Humboldt University Berlin, Newtonstr. 15, 12489 Berlin, Germany
- <sup>174</sup> Main Astronomical Observatory of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Zabolotnoho str., 27, 03143, Kyiv, Ukraine
- <sup>175</sup> Space Technology Centre, AGH University of Science and Technology, Aleja Mickiewicza, 30, 30-059, Kraków, Poland
- <sup>176</sup> Academic Computer Centre CYFRONET AGH, ul. Nawojki 11, 30-950, Kraków, Poland
- <sup>177</sup> Institute of Astronomy, Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Informatics, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, ul. Grudziądzka 5, 87-100 Toruń, Poland
- <sup>178</sup> Cherenkov Telescope Array Observatory gGmbH, Via Gobetti, Bologna, Italy
- <sup>179</sup> Warsaw University of Technology, Faculty of Electronics and Information Technology, Institute of Electronic Systems, Nowowiejska 15/19, 00-665 Warsaw, Poland
- <sup>180</sup> Physics Program, Graduate School of Advanced Science and Engineering, Hiroshima University, 739-8526 Hiroshima, Japan
- <sup>181</sup> School of Physics and Astronomy, Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai, China
- <sup>182</sup> Department of Physical Sciences, Aoyama Gakuin University, Fuchinobe, Sagami-hara, Kanagawa, 252-5258, Japan
- <sup>183</sup> Division of Physics and Astronomy, Graduate School of Science, Kyoto University, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 606-8502, Japan
- <sup>184</sup> Port d'Informació Científica, Edifici D, Carrer de l'Albareda, 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Spain
- <sup>185</sup> INAF - Osservatorio Astrofisico di Torino, Strada Osservatorio 20, 10025 Pino Torinese (TO), Italy
- <sup>186</sup> Departamento de Física, Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, Avenida España, 1680 Valparaíso, Chile
- <sup>187</sup> Faculty of Science, Ibaraki University, Mito, Ibaraki, 310-8512, Japan