Thousands die in Turkey earthquake

Unsafe construction blamed for high death toll

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19 August 1999

An earthquake measuring an estimated 7.8 on the Richter scale hit northwest Turkey in the early morning hours of August 17 killing thousands and injuring more than ten thousand. Most of the victims were buried while they slept by the collapse of poorly constructed apartment buildings and homes.

The official death toll exceeds 3,700 and is expected to increase as more bodies are discovered in the rubble. Sixteen thousand are reported injured and some ten thousand are missing. The quake struck a heavily populated region encompassing the major cities of Istanbul and Izmit. Worst hit was the city of Izmit located near the epicenter, where some 2,000 died. Izmit is a major industrial center, home of Turkey's car parts and tire industry as well as petrochemicals.

Row after row of apartment buildings in poorer parts of Izmit collapsed burying thousands. In the low income Cumhuriyet neighborhood only 15 survivors were pulled from the wreckage of a seven-story apartment building housing 100.

A huge fire erupted at Turkey's largest oil refinery outside Izmit, engulfing seven of the facility's thirty storage tanks and threatening residential areas. The refinery accounts for 85 percent of Turkey's domestic oil consumption.

In the port of Golcuk 248 sailors are missing and presumed dead in the rubble of naval barracks. The mayor of Golcuk reported that 500 buildings housing 20,000 families had collapsed.

The earthquake caused widespread power and communication failures. Hundreds of thousands of people camped out in the streets in tents and makeshift shelters, homeless or afraid to return to their apartments because of repeated aftershocks. In Izmit medical workers smashed pharmacy windows to get at badly needed medicines and supplies.

In poorer districts on the outskirts of Istanbul witnesses said some buildings had “collapsed like a house of cards.” However, in more prosperous neighborhoods tall buildings, which had apparently been built to required safety standards, survived. Tourist hotels and government offices also suffered little damage.

Commentators for the BBC blamed unscrupulous land and building contractors and poor quality illegal housing for the high death toll. “Murderers” declared the headline of the Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet.* It published photographs of illicitly built apartment buildings that had collapsed while surrounding legal buildings remained intact.

Agence France-Presse reported that more than one-half the population of Istanbul lives in illegally constructed housing. It noted that whole districts of Turkish towns and cities are made up of buildings erected without regard to safety standards. The Turkish Chamber of Commerce estimates that 65 percent of all buildings in Turkey are constructed without a permit or without regard to building codes. In Sirnak in the southeast of the country the percentage is 90 percent.

Millions of refugees have flooded Istanbul and other major cities in recent years fleeing poverty as well as the conflict between the Turkish government and Kurdish insurgents. Istanbul has grown by 5 million in recent years and other cities have tripled their population during the same time.

The housing demand has been met by unscrupulous contractors operating without permits and using cheap building materials. According to Professor Nezhdet Teymur, an architecture and town planning dean at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, much of the modern housing in poorer urban regions of Turkey is constructed of mud brick and is unable to withstand

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the impact of an earthquake. The problem is compounded by the huge influx of migrants from the countryside. Thirty years ago three-quarters of Turkey's population lived in rural areas. Today three-quarters of the population is urban.

Victims are not only angry at unscrupulous construction contractors but at the slow response of the Turkish authorities to the disaster. Government assistance was often delayed for many hours if it came at all. Rescue efforts were limited due to inadequate manpower and equipment. The mayor of Izmit was forced to issue a plea for international assistance to deal with the fire at his city's refinery.

The ease with which builders have flouted safety regulations points to official indifference and corruption. Furthermore, Turkish authorities had ample warning that an earthquake of the magnitude that struck Tuesday was likely.

The area where the earthquake hit lies atop the North Anatolian Fault and is known to be extremely unstable. The fault caused earthquakes in 1939 and 1967. A 1992 study estimated a 12 percent chance of a major quake by 2020. There had been repeated warnings about the potentially disastrous impact of an earthquake in northwestern Turkey following a less severe tremor in the south that killed 140 people in 1998.

A team of Japanese experts had warned Turkish officials of the dangers they faced based on the experience of the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan. “We cannot predict earthquakes exactly,” said Tsuneji Rikitake, director-general of Japan's earthquake prediction study institute, “but a lot of seismologists have warned the region is one of the most dangerous areas in the world. But the [Turkish] government ignored our warnings.

“This wasn't a natural disaster, it was a human disaster.”

The earthquake hit at a time of growing economic troubles in northwestern Turkey. During the first quarter of 1999 the economy contracted at an annual rate of 8.5 percent. Average annual growth rates in Turkey have been in the neighborhood of 6 percent over the last four years. Russ Evans of the British Geological Survey who worked in Izmit in the 1980s said, “You've got hills, anything up to 7,000 feet to the south, you've got rapid development as an industrial town, you've got people building factories and building a major refinery. They put car parts manufacturing and all the rest of it into the actual fault zone, and the hinterland on the sides of the hills 500 feet high.

“You're throwing buildings up cheaply when the Turkish economy is not in a wonderful state, there's not a lot of control over the building and you have poor materials available. People were putting up these two, three or four roomed flats, typically five or six stories high on the sides of these hills.”

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