

Anger mounts in Turkey following earthquake disaster

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The official death toll from the earthquake that struck northwest Turkey on Tuesday officially surpassed 6,800 on Thursday afternoon and is expected to rise further as rescuers recover bodies from the rubble. More than 33,000 people are injured, and thousands more are still missing.

The Anatolia News Agency said that in the Izmit and Golcuk areas 3,000 people were killed, an increase of 1,000 from the earlier official count. In the naval town of Golcuk, about 80 miles to the southeast of Istanbul, Mayor Ismail Baris estimated as many as 10,000 were still trapped. Many of the town's shattered buildings had still not been checked 36 hours after the disaster. The eventual death toll could top 20,000. Around 75,000 buildings are estimated to have collapsed in Izmit alone and the authorities have been forced to use the town's ice-rink as a morgue.

Under conditions where barely any state support exists, the repercussions are barely calculable for those made unemployed by the earthquake and for Turkey's many poor. *Finansal Forum*, Turkey's business newspaper, estimated that the quake damage would cost the country \$25 billion. The business association Tusaid said the disaster could cost the struggling economy \$40 billion.

On top of this, there are fears of major environmental damage as fire fighters continue to tackle a blazing inferno at Tupras, the country's biggest oil refinery near Izmit, about 80 miles southeast of Istanbul. The authorities tried to evacuate a three-mile zone around the oil refinery in an area that accounts for a third of Turkey's economic output. Although the fire was being brought under control as this article was written, the worst fear was that the blaze could engulf the entire field of 30 giant storage tanks, touching off an environmental disaster, and reach a nearby fertiliser

facility with 8,000 tons of highly dangerous ammonia. Many factories and businesses depend on the plant.

An international rescue operation has been mounted involving Greece, Britain, Israel, Switzerland, France, the US, Germany, Russia, Japan and other countries. Seven affected provinces have been declared a disaster zone and the government has promised compensation to victims of the quake. But protests are growing against the government of Prime Minister Bulet Ecevit for having not moved swiftly enough in meeting the crisis and for its relations with corrupt builders responsible for erecting the substandard housing, the collapse of which has led to so many casualties and fatalities. Press commentary on the relief effort has been scathing, with the *Radikal* newspaper proclaiming it a "pure fiasco". The *Sbah* newspaper called the state "helpless". This is only a pale reflection of the anger felt by tens of thousands of ordinary Turkish people. With family members dead or missing, many are being forced to spend a second night on the streets because they have been left homeless, or fear that their houses are unsafe.

In Istanbul 100,000 have been made homeless. In the suburb of Avcilar, residents described the property speculators who had hastily thrown up buildings during the boom period of the past 20 years as "killers". In Yalova, one contractor was almost lynched by an angry crowd and his car was torched. Many newly built houses in Avcilar collapsed like a deck of cards. The English online edition of the paper *Milliyet* writes: "In Avcilar, the area of Istanbul most affected by the strong earthquake, most of the damage was due to the faulty construction and architecture of buildings. Mutlu Ozturk from the Engineering and Architecture Chambers' Association (TMMOB), after inspections in the area, said, 'The earthquake tore down those

buildings with faulty construction, nature selected weak and illegally constructed buildings and forgave the strong.”

Over half of the buildings in Istanbul, and in many other Turkish major towns, are built in this way and are known as *Gecekondus* (huts built overnight). They are mainly occupied by former peasants and day labourers who have fled to the west of the country to escape from desperate conditions, as well as those fleeing the civil war being waged against Kurdish regions of Turkey. The apartments are constructed with no regard to the stability or the suitability of the materials employed in a country that is regularly the victim of medium-sized earthquakes. This saves money for the building company and maximises their profit.

Despite the inadequacies in their construction, such apartments are not particularly cheap. The state authorities are prepared to close both eyes when the bribes are high enough and there is little or no systematic building regulation or control. Local politicians, often Islamic demagogues looking for votes, allow the building mafia to operate without hindrance.

Occasionally, town authorities mobilise the police to violently clear and tear down whole slum areas—often strongholds for left-wing groups and the nationalist Kurdish Workers Party, the PKK. Only a week before the quake, the conservative Interior Minister Saadettin Tantan announced he would tear down all *Gecekondus* without a court order. He gave no indication where the displaced tenants should go.

The conservative Turkish President Suleman Demirel, and the social democratic Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, have continually expressed their “profound sadness and sympathy for the fate of the nation” and seek to reassure everyone that the state will do “everything it can” to help. The executive committee of the fascist MHP party (or Grey Wolves), which is part of the ruling coalition, stated, “As long as we continue with our callousness and negligence, we will have to suffer more than we normally should in such disasters.” Former Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz, head of the conservative ANAP that is also in the governing coalition, said that he had attempted to do everything in his power to assist when an earthquake took place during his period in office, but excessive bureaucracy had prevented help to compensate the

victims from coming in time. This time it had to be different, he said.

These are empty words. Last autumn, Yilmaz was implicated in a corruption scandal involving dubious building employers such as Korkmaz Yigit and the mafia, which enjoys close relations with the state and even closer relations with the MHP. The intimate, almost symbiotic, integration of the state with mafia elements, fascists, corrupt politicians and employers has been an open secret in Turkey for years. The most well-known figures in this clique, such as Sedat Bucak and Mehmet Agar, continue to sit in parliament to this day. Proposals to lift their parliamentary immunity have been provisionally postponed until after the summer break while, at the same time, most of the demands for cuts and restructuring of Turkey's economy by the IMF are being implemented.

Indications of just how those construction firms now being denounced as “murderers” will be dealt with could be seen in the past week. The newspaper *Milliyet* announced that in a newly proposed Amnesty Law, no consideration would be given to those guilty of “crimes against the state” (political offences). But leniency would be shown to building employers responsible for over 140 dead following an earthquake in Adana on the Mediterranean in June of last year.

If and when the numerous victims of the current quake will receive adequate compensation is also an open question. The state is not only corrupt—it has no money. In order to fulfil the criteria for membership of the European Union and the demands of the IMF, Turkey has carried out a huge and painful transfer of resources from the majority of the population into the pockets of domestic and international employers and bankers.

The end result is that instead of “forging the nation together in its hour of need”, as the government may have hoped, the earthquake has exposed the vast gulf dividing Turkish working people from the capitalist class, their political representatives and protectors.



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