

Turkish government calls off rescue efforts as earthquake death toll mounts

Barry Grey**24 August 1999**

A week after the earthquake that struck the heavily populated northwest of Turkey, the toll of death and destruction continues to mount. As heavy rains pelted the stricken region on Monday, Turkish sources placed the death toll at more than 12,000 and relief officials warned the figure could rise to 40,000.

The Turkish government estimates 33,000 were injured in the quake and 38,000 remain missing. An estimated 60,000 buildings were either destroyed or seriously damaged. Some 200,000 people have been made homeless, and the vast majority have received no emergency shelter. They are either sleeping outdoors or fleeing the cities and towns devastated by the quake. For the most part the government has failed to provide such necessities as food, diapers, toilets or soap. To the extent that these items have reached the afflicted, they have come from charitable groups and private companies.

International relief agencies, foreign and local volunteers and the Turkish press continued to denounce the government over the weekend for its failure to organize an effective response to the disaster, and its culpability in allowing contractors and real estate developers to build unsafe housing in working class neighborhoods throughout the region, which lies above the treacherous North Anatolian fault line.

As both commentators and grief-stricken quake victims have complained, last Tuesday's disaster had long been predicted. "Turkey never learns from its past disasters," a Turkish architects' and engineers' association complained in a statement, "despite the fact that 95 percent of its people live in seismically active zones."

A geologist said that the badly-hit cities of Adapazari and Golcuk, where more than 5,000 people have died, should never have been built in the first place on alluvial deposits and marshlands that "amplify seismic activity two-to-five-fold."

Many press reports have noted the gaping social disparities that were exposed by the quake, with photographs of houses and apartment buildings in poor and working class areas reduced to rubble, while buildings in nearby upper-income and tourist areas suffered little or no damage.

After four days in which government agencies and personnel were all but absent from the cities and towns hardest hit, and desperate but poorly coordinated rescue efforts were undertaken almost entirely by foreign teams and local volunteers, the government began to dispatch large numbers of soldiers to Istanbul, Izmit, Golcuk and other towns along the 200-mile stretch affected by the earthquake.

However the troops did little to assist in the rescue and relief effort. Their main assignment was to prevent looting. Their deployment coincided with a decision by President Suleiman Demirel and Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit to largely abandon the effort to extract survivors from the ruins, and begin plowing the debris. This was despite the rescue on Monday of a 54-year-old woman and a 3-year-old boy, who were lifted from rubble in the town of Cinarcik, 31 miles south of Istanbul.

Government authorities ordered British teams in the town of Adapazari, at the center of the worst affected region, to abandon the search and pull out. General Hayri Kivrikoglu, the top-ranking military commander of the 800,000-strong army, declared, "To a large extent search and rescue operations have now finished." Turkish officials asked the United Nations help in collecting 45,000 body bags.

Authorities in the capital of Ankara said the decision to abandon rescue efforts was necessitated by the danger that heaps of rubble and decomposing bodies would lead to an outbreak of cholera, dysentery or typhoid. Health Minister Osman Durmus urged residents living near the Tupras oil refinery in Izmet to evacuate. The refinery was badly damaged in a fire sparked by the quake, and Durmus warned that the heavy rains might combine with chemicals released by the fire to produce acid rain.

But quake victims, already shocked and enraged by the government's incompetence and callousness, were driven to even greater despair by the sight of their homes being plowed under, with their loved-ones still buried in the rubble. In Golcuk, rescuers who thought they heard signs of life from within some buildings were given five minutes to check before the bulldozers resumed clawing away the metal and masonry. One woman went to her knees in front of a bulldozer screaming at the volunteers that she was sure she heard the voice of her 12-year-old son from under the ruins of her home. Her neighbor said she heard it too and begged the bulldozer driver not to start his engine.

A team of doctors from Trakya University in Istanbul refused to obey requests by soldiers to dismember corpses to ease the cleanup. Dr. Mustafa Adiguzel said, "We did not come here to do this kind of cruelty. Let them get more soldiers and equipment to remove all the bodies with dignity." He continued: "Nobody thought to mobilize us. We just came." Asked about the effectiveness of the government after the earthquake, Dr. Adiguzel said, "Our government is shut. They aren't at home. No one knows where they are."

Interviewed on the Public Broadcasting System's evening news program in the US, Dr. Claude de Ville de Goyet of the World Health Organization disputed Turkish government assertions of an imminent epidemic and said the decision to break off rescue efforts could be considered a violation of human rights.

Whatever the verdict of health experts on this particular issue, there is no debating the fact that the earthquake has exposed the venal and repressive character of the Turkish state, and its inability to meet the most elementary needs of the Turkish masses. The natural forces that cracked the earth beneath Turkey's most industrialized and populous region exposed the rot and filth that underlie what the US chooses to call a "developing democracy."

The main response of the regime in Ankara has been to look to its own defense in the face of rising popular anger, and reassure Western financial institutions and investors that it will continue to carry out their demands for economic "reforms." Government officials have acknowledged that the deployment of troops to the earthquake zone was delayed because top policy-makers were debating whether to declare martial law.

President Demirel, in a statement worthy of Marie Antoinette, said the people should not expect the government to "work miracles." Prime Minister Ecevit went on national television Saturday and made the ludicrous statement, in light of the past week's events, that the people "need only to trust in the strength of our nation and our state." General Kivrikoglu scolded journalists for criticizing the role of the army. "Don't demoralize the soldiers," he warned.

According to published reports, senior government officials reprimanded the state-owned TRT television network for broadcasting footage suggesting that government negligence was responsible for chaos in the relief effort.

At the same time the Ecevit declared his government would continue to comply with the terms set by the International Monetary Fund to qualify for an IMF stand-by program. These include the privatization of state companies, including the Tupras refinery, deregulation, a sharp contraction in public expenditures, and other measures to further open up Turkey to foreign investment. The government is also pursuing a retrenchment in social security benefits.

Despite pressure from the military-dominated state, some newspapers continued to run editorials and commentaries sharply critical of the regime. The center-left daily *Cumhuriyet* ran a front-page editorial which declared, "The need for fundamental change in Turkey is obvious. If this earthquake does not rouse us from our torpor, it will be impossible to maintain hope for the future." The same newspaper on Sunday ran a cartoon that showed President Demirel telling a bleeding man pulling his wife out of the rubble: "Don't sue the state, sue the quake." The man replies: "For allowing building on the fault line? For illegal construction? The quake?"

The disgust and bitterness of broad layers of the population run deep. Some remarks quoted by the US press provide an indication. On Monday the *New York Times* cited a 29-year-old contractor whose brother was killed in the quake in Golcuk: "We have no government. They are a prop. They don't care about anything. They just work for themselves."

An 18-year-old youth said, "We have no faith in government. We have all been raised seeing the corruption all around us."

Popular outrage has been directed most intensely at Turkey's Minister of Health, Osman Durmus, a leader of the fascist MHP party (also known as the Grey Wolves), which is part of the governing coalition. "Enough: shut up and leave," the liberal daily *Radikal* newspaper said in a banner front page headline, calling Durmus a "callous, ignorant racist."

Newspapers across the political spectrum were unanimous in attacking Durmus for having played down aid requirements in the earthquake zone and scorning foreign aid offers. Newspapers and television stations said their telephone lines were jammed with citizens calling in to protest against Durmus' statements and demanding his removal from office.

Durmus reportedly disputed the need for foreign doctors, medical supplies and field hospitals in the stricken region and was quoted as saying Turks would feel more comfortable with doctors who shared their own culture. He was quoted as saying he did not want Greek blood donations. *Radikal* reported further that MHP members at the government's crisis center intervened to deny permission for a team of Armenian earthquake rescue experts to provide assistance to the victims.

The health minister ridiculed an Italian medical team's call for portable toilets, saying there were plenty of toilets in local mosques.

"They find them dirty. Should I come and clean them myself? Keep them clean yourselves," the minister was quoted as saying.

The Turkish state is most sensitive to popular anger over the role of the military in the earthquake disaster. Behind a thin façade of parliamentary democracy, the military is the dominant force, and a tremendous effort has been made to whip up support for the army's war against the Kurdish minority. Since the abduction last February of Kurdish Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan—now appealing his death sentence at the hands of a military court—the government has sought to divert mass opinion from the worsening social and economic crisis with a patriotic frenzy directed against the Kurds.

Now, at a stroke, it is revealed before millions of Turks that the military and the state are good for nothing but the enrichment of the elite, repression of political dissent and persecution of the Kurds.

The US response to the earthquake has been crafted to shore up the badly discredited regime in Ankara. President Clinton declared Turkey "our longtime ally" and Washington dispatched a warship with several thousand marines to the country.



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