

Scant international aid for Turkish earthquake disaster

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Despite the constant references to a “massive international relief effort”, the Turkish earthquake disaster revealed a studied indifference to human suffering on the part of the major governments. The latest available total figure for aid donated by both foreign governments and charity groups to Turkey is a meagre \$20.6 million in cash, according to the United Nations. This figure would not even cover the costs for one day of NATO's recent bombardment of Yugoslavia.

No figure is available on the value of “in-kind” contributions, in the form of search and rescue teams and medical experts. This amounted to 2,200 international rescue experts and 142 rescue dogs from 52 countries deployed in eight locations.

Even with this the overall total remains small. Many of these were volunteers and unpaid for their time. Most fall into one of four categories: they have to take unpaid leave, which is always limited; the time comes out of their annual holiday allocation; they have to stack up hours owing from overtime; or their employer grants them a limited amount of extra paid leave.

This week Fine Gael leader John Bruton asked the Irish Government to increase its grant for the Turkish earthquake aid effort to £20 million. He called the current Irish cash commitment of £700,000 a minor sum.

A minor sum indeed, but bigger than that pledged by Britain. The Blair Labour government has so far given £500,000 to the Red Cross and £50,000 to the UN towards the international relief effort. The practical aid offered to Turkey included 60 tons of supplies, 57 UK fire fighters, 23 charity workers and a few government officials.

In Europe overall, Germany, home to 2 million Turks, initially provided just 1 million marks

(\$540,000) for the relief effort. The Dutch government donated just under \$360,000. France sent 61 rescuers and 15 tonnes of equipment. Italy sent a transport plane with medicines and a team of experts. Denmark sent 16 rescue workers and nine trained dogs. Greece sent three planes of aid and a team of 25 disaster experts and sniffer dogs. The Netherlands has pledged to send 30,000 prefabricated homes.

The European Commission itself pledged just 2 million euros (US\$2.11 million) in humanitarian aid.

The United States sent a 70-member search-and-rescue team and provided helicopters from its military bases in Turkey. It has sent 30,000 blankets and is preparing to fly in 3,500 all-weather tents.

Japan promised further financial and humanitarian aid after dispatching a relief team of 53 medical and rescue experts. Israel has sent over 150 soldiers, among them medical personnel, rescue workers and dog handlers and a 120-member mercy mission.

The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, has sent 27 tonnes of aid. It has also dispatched psychologists to offer counselling to children who have lost parents or relatives in the disaster.

The International Monetary Fund does not grant emergency aid, but in an emergency countries have drawing rights of up to 25 percent of their shares in the fund's capital. Turkey's capital is US\$1.317 billion and it will be allowed to borrow \$330 million.

The aid thus far provided pales into insignificance when compared with the scale of Turkey's losses. An exact estimate of the economic damage suffered by Turkey is not yet possible, but calculations hover in the range of US\$20-25 billion—equivalent to 10 percent of Turkey's gross national product.

This figure is at least 16 times higher than the reconstruction bill for Kosovo as estimated by the

World Bank—\$1.23 billion. Experts estimate that it will be at least 10 to 15 years before the country's economy is totally back on the rails.

The majority of foreign search and rescue teams, excluding medical teams, pulled out on Wednesday under the orders of the Turkish government. There are 200,000 people left homeless and who face the threat of rapidly spreading disease. David Alexander, International Director of the British Red Cross, said: "The major concern at the moment is to avert a public health crisis which could be caused by a combination of the hot weather, recent heavy rains, decomposing bodies and broken sewerage systems." Relief items such as tents, blankets and food were in short supply, he added.

Other health workers warned that potential killers such as typhoid fever and dysentery could flare in the squalid makeshift camps where families rely on contaminated water supplies. Weakened by shock and lack of proper food, people are made susceptible to disease. An Israeli hospital team has reported the first two cases of typhoid fever.

The earthquake struck at a time when the Turkish economy was struggling with a deficit of around \$20 billion and an annual inflation rate of more than 50 percent. A recent IMF loan was made dependent on economic restructuring and a major offensive against social security benefits and pensions.

Last year 18 percent of tax revenues came from four of the affected provinces, 6 percent of exports and 16 percent of imports, according to Ottoman Bank. Turkish Central Bank Governor Gazi Ercel said the government would spend up to \$7 billion on rebuilding businesses destroyed by the earthquake. Oil refiner Tupras estimated damage at its Izmit plant to be \$200 million, of which only \$150 million will be covered by insurance. Fitch IBCA said higher spending and falling revenues could raise the 1999 public sector borrowing requirement to 15 percent of GNP, two percent higher than previously expected. Bankers say a rise in interest rates will bring an extra burden to the country's debt bill.



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