

Algerian earthquake disaster provokes wave of anger

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Latest official figures from the Algerian earthquake are 2,162 dead and 8,965 injured, with the final number of deaths expected to be over 3,000 as more bodies continue to be recovered from collapsed buildings.

Dozens of international rescue teams with special equipment and sniffer dogs are starting to withdraw as the chances of finding any more people alive sink to zero. With temperatures above 30 degrees centigrade (86F), very few of those trapped have survived after the earthquake hit a densely populated region along the northern coast of Algeria on the evening of Wednesday May 21. Parts of the capital Algiers, as well as cities to the east such as Boumerdes—where half of the deaths occurred—were hit by the quake that registered 6.8 on the Richter scale. The earthquake's centre was Thenia, 65 kilometres (40 miles) east of Algiers.

Several reports have made clear that the high death toll was largely due to badly constructed housing. One example is of a 10-storey high apartment in Reghaia, 40 kilometres (25 miles) east of Algiers, which contained 78 flats. It collapsed completely—250 bodies were pulled out and another 600 are feared still buried. Another report is of the complete collapse of an apartment block housing 38 families—more than 200 people—in Bordja el Kiffan, a suburb of Algiers. Few people escaped from the building that was only two years old.

As well as using shoddy building materials and breaking the standards set for construction in the region, many of the collapses also occurred in areas where building is illegal because of unstable ground conditions. The country has had smaller earthquakes in 1999, 1994 and 1989 as well as one in centred on the town of El Asnam in 1980 that killed around 3,000 people. Building regulations that were brought in after 1980 are routinely ignored by developers and corrupt

government officials.

Thousands of people are now living in the open in makeshift camps with fears that buildings that are still standing could be affected by aftershocks—one of which reached Richter scale 4.1 on Saturday May 24. Power, telephones and water supplies have been cut and there are widespread complaints that the government, after mounting no effective response to the disaster, is doing little to aid those now rendered homeless. Because of the lack of drinking water there are fears that disease could rapidly spread in the region given the high temperatures.

Virtually every report of the earthquake comments on the enormous anger of the population directed at the Algerian government. When President Bouteflika attempted a visit of Boumerdes on Saturday, an angry crowd hurling rubble and kicking the cars in his motorcade drove him out. Bouteflika's show of sympathy was perceived to be canvassing for support in next year's presidential elections. The chant went up that is now familiar on anti-government demonstrations: "Pouvoir assassin!" (The authorities—killers). Bouteflika faced a similar response in Lakhdaria where the government was accused of stealing international aid sent to help the earthquake victims.

Bouteflika's government is backed by a military that has long experience of repressive rule. A recent Human Rights Watch report highlights that the number of "disappeared" during the last decade—people seized by security forces and no further details released to their relatives—is over 7,000, more than any country in the world except war-time Bosnia. Yet despite their fear of the authorities the earthquake disaster prompted many to demonstrate and openly attack Algeria's corrupt rulers.

The usually subservient Algerian press was moved, in some cases, to call for Bouteflika's resignation. *Le Matin* warned, "as usual, in a splendid ostrich posture, the government will fail to heed the major warnings Algerians are sending it."

Bouteflika is strongly supported by the United States and other western governments. The Algerian regime is now privatising large sectors of the state sector and opening up investment to western companies. Despite the vast oil and gas production, the Algerian population live in desperate poverty, with nearly 50 percent below the poverty line and official unemployment running at 30 percent but in reality much higher.



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