

Earthquake in Turkey sparks violent protests

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According to recent estimates, the May 2 earthquake in Turkey killed 167 people—including 84 children—with 521 people injured. As was the case with the earthquake of 1999, which killed 17,000, this latest quake further highlights the social conditions that have resulted from the policies of the Turkish ruling elite and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The policies of deregulation and economic liberalism implemented in the past have created a small layer of unscrupulous entrepreneurs who stop at nothing to make profits. Protected from the population by both the police and the military, this criminal layer has nothing to fear from corrupt politicians and is able to ignore even the most elementary regulations relating to the welfare of the general public.

The number of casualties would have been even higher if the earthquake had not occurred in such a sparsely populated region. The deaths of so many children were particularly tragic. Most of the villages in the Bingöl province have no schools and are connected by an inferior road network. Because of this, many children live in the dormitory of their school during the week. It was such a dormitory that collapsed in Çeltiksuyu, as did many other buildings including the town hall and the ministry of housing in the city of Bingöl. Dr. Russ Evans of the British Geological Survey is quoted by BBC Online: “Good building regulations and seismographic maps do exist in Turkey—but the problem is that the regulations are not being observed.”

This catastrophe is a direct outcome of the right-wing policies implemented by the different governments, of every shade, ruling Turkey over the last 10 years. During this period, many new buildings were erected in Bingöl to house people fleeing from clashes between Kurdish nationalists and the Turkish army. While most of the older buildings stood up to the earthquake, many of the newer ones collapsed. It has become obvious that

these buildings were constructed in complete disregard of regulations in order to save money and maximise profits.

The school itself was erected in 1999, just after the government—consisting of a “left-wing”-Kemalite party in coalition with fascists and conservatives—had promised to pay more attention to building regulations following the earthquake of that year. The constructor of the building is suspected to be entrepreneur Seref Bozkus, a relative of Fevz Berdibek, who is a member of the Turkish parliament. Berdibek himself is being accused of responsibility for the construction of a school that collapsed during the earthquake as well as of allocating other building contracts.

According to press reports, about 20 private homes were destroyed. But nearly every building owned by the state has become unusable. The region is known to be an earthquake area. During an earthquake in Bingöl in 1971, 878 people died. Consequently, there was much talk about relocating the villages in the region, which is situated on unstable subsoil. Experts criticise the fact that nothing has happened. According to a report issued by the office for statistics in the year 2000, 295 buildings in Bingöl were in urgent need of improvements to make them earthquake-proof. The report also recommended the renovation of 1,698 buildings.

One day after the earthquake, there was violent fighting in the streets of Bingöl. About 1,000 demonstrators demanded the resignation of the governor of the province and accused the government of supplying insufficient blankets and tents. In the end, they attempted to attack the residence of the governor. The police reacted with the brutality they are known for in Kurdish provinces like Bingöl. After the police had provoked the crowd by firing warning shots using automatic weapons, a police vehicle deliberately drove into the crowd, injuring several demonstrators.

The governor of the province claimed that “provocateurs” of the Kurdish nationalist party PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) were responsible for the clash. “They want to set the people against the state and the security forces,” he claimed. Prime Minister Erdogan, who likes to depict himself as a tribune of the people, also chimed in. Without presenting any kind of evidence, he claimed that there existed “secret service knowledge” of “serious activities aimed at creating provocations.” He defended the police actions, declaring that it was sometimes necessary to fire into the air “to get a situation under control.” But to be on the safe side, he moved the Bingöl chief of police to Ankara.

More thoughtful elements of the Turkish bourgeoisie bluntly warned the government that the events in Bingöl herald a social explosion in the Kurdish areas. The lead article of the May 3 issue of the *Turkish Daily News* states: “The events in Bingöl are not just about a large number of frustrated people who let off steam against police vehicles and the residence of the governor. It is an act of resistance against the state on behalf of the mainly Kurdish local population, which has to be carefully examined by the government and all parts of the state.... The authorities must understand that anger is smouldering in Southeastern Turkey, where the government has once again forgotten its citizens and abandoned them to their fate.”

The social conditions of the population in the whole of Turkey have declined considerably since the earthquake in 1999, following a serious financial crisis and the implementation of IMF programs resulting in deregulation, budget cuts and privatisations. Following the capitulation and retreat of the PKK, the civil war in the already backward and neglected Kurdish areas in Southeast Turkey is more or less over. But despite all promises of the government, neither the social conditions nor the conduct of the police has changed—as demonstrated anew by the actions by the police in Bingöl.

The “democratic reforms” of the new AKP government—effusively celebrated in the West as the basis for more liberties for the Kurdish population—have remained no more than empty words for most Kurds.

It can be assumed that the Kurdish nationalists are as surprised and worried about the sudden outburst of

social discontent as the state itself is. They have done everything within their power to support the state in this period of crisis.

The news agency DIHA, which is close to the PKK, casually reported that because of the earthquake most May Day rallies in the Kurdish provinces had been cancelled. Most Kurdish towns in Southeastern Turkey are governed by the moderate Kurdish nationalist party HADEP, which is currently threatened with being banned by the state.

Since the beginning of the war on Iraq, the PKK, which has changed its name to KADEK, has been especially eager to show its willingness to negotiate with the Turkish state. At the end of March, its chairman, Abdullah Öcalan, declared: “I want to send to the army a message that is associated with the speeches of Mustafa Kemal in the twenties... He placed his hopes on Turkish-Kurdish unity and stressed the close solidarity (of these peoples). I am convinced that the army is linked to the traditions of Mustafa Kemal.”



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