

Earthquake kills tens of thousands in Iran

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The earthquake that struck the city of Bam in southeastern Iran December 26 is a human tragedy of historic proportions. Estimates of the final death-toll range as high as 40,000. More than 25,000 bodies have already been retrieved, many of those subsequently buried in mass graves dug by bulldozers. Tens of thousands of people were also injured in the quake, which measured 6.7 on the Richter scale and released energy roughly equivalent to a one-megaton hydrogen bomb. The earthquake was the world's most deadly in at least a decade.

One hundred thousand people are reportedly homeless in the area, many—already in shock from having lost family members—forced to survive the first few nights in the freezing cold with only thin blankets or towels. The spread of disease is a major concern for health officials. Looters, some armed with pistols and automatic weapons, have stolen relief supplies.

Nearby Barazat, a town of 20,000, was also devastated by the quake. In a widely quoted comment, Italian rescue official Luca Spoletini said of the town, “There is nothing any more. Not one single house, not one single building stands upright. It is like the Apocalypse. I have never seen anything like that.”

Bam, 600 miles southeast of Tehran, is an ancient city, founded nearly 2,000 years ago. It was once a significant stop on the Silk Road for merchants and travelers between the Far East and Europe. Its 38-tower mud-brick citadel, a favorite of tourists, dates from the seventeenth century.

Sixty to seventy percent of the city's dwellings, including virtually the entire old quarter, was reduced to rubble in the earthquake that struck at 5:28 am local time on the Muslim day of rest, killing thousands instantly. Many of Bam's houses crumbled into small pieces of mud-brick and dust. The construction, heavy roofs resting on sun-dried, mud-brick walls without support beams, guaranteed that there would be few air pockets, crushing or suffocating residents.

Chaos and confusion reigned in the city Friday, as its hospitals, ambulance stations and municipal buildings were destroyed, its fire service unable to function and many of its government officials killed.

The British *Observer* describes the scene: “In the freezing half-light of dawn the survivors streamed out of their shattered homes. Witnesses described hundreds, covered in dust and blood, crawling over piles of rubble, screaming as they tried to shift tonnes of smashed debris with their bare hands. ... As tens of thousands of traumatised people tried to leave the city, some even setting off to walk to the city of Kerman, 120 miles away, to get help, thousands more attempted to get in through the narrow streets, hoping to find and help their relatives. British aid workers who flew over the city

in Iranian Army helicopters described the scene as one of ‘complete confusion.’”

The *Washington Post* noted, “Video images from Bam ... showed a vista of desolation that appeared to extend for miles. On residential streets lined with the city's trademark eucalyptus trees, whole blocks of homes had collapsed onto their square lots, loose bricks spilling over sidewalks where bodies lay neatly tied in fuzzy blankets. The city was without water or power. Loved ones squatted beside the corpses, weeping and brushing dust from the faces of the dead. A wailing man cradled the body of a child in one hand, and held his head with the other.” Reuters reported the case of a 45-year-old housewife who had lost 60 relatives in the earthquake.

The *New York Times* quoted a 53-year-old woman, Kobrah Abbasi Nejad, who had lost four grown children, “My body aches, we can't sleep ... We wish we had been killed, not them. They were so young.”

Iranian television news carried an interview with a woman who had lost uncles and aunts and her two children, while her husband had suffered a broken back and legs. “Nobody went unscathed in my street,” she told a reporter. Asked what assistance she expected to receive, the woman began crying: “What can I say? What can I ask for? Only tell others and help the people who have nothing left. They have no water, no electricity, nothing at all. The whole place has been turned into rubble. There is nothing left, nothing.”

The Iranian Red Crescent, affiliated with the International Committee of the Red Cross, dispatched 500 emergency workers to the area Friday. A Red Crescent spokesperson appealed for further help, saying, “the scale of the disaster is so wide.” Iranian and foreign rescue teams from dozens of countries streamed into the city over the weekend, bringing every kind of equipment for detecting signs of life. German, Danish, Norwegian, Swiss and Turkish emergency workers were among the first on the scene. A team of 75 Californian firefighters was on stand-by. RapidUK, a team of British volunteers who specialize in earthquakes, also arrived and started to search for survivors.

According to Iranian relief officials, by Monday some 2,000 people had been dragged out of the ruins alive. The Iranian state news agency reported that those rescued were located thanks to the “sniffer dogs and high-tech ultrasound equipment of both Iranian and foreign emergency teams.” The US, which has had no diplomatic ties to Iran since 1979, is sending 75 tons of relief supplies.

A 12-year-old girl with a broken leg was rescued Monday after three days in the rubble of her family home. Seventy-two hours is about the longest people can survive buried under rubble,

according to experts.

Iranian officials announced that the search for survivors would continue Monday, contradicting a statement by the United Nations that the effort would be called off. “We will not stop searching for survivors. So long as there is a chance of finding survivors, these operations will continue,” said Jahanbakhsh Khanjani, an interior ministry spokesman.

Leading Iranian government officials arrived on the scene Monday. The country’s top religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, inspected the damage and promised that the city would be rebuilt. “I offer my condolences to all families, brothers and sisters who lost their loved ones in this catastrophe with all my heart,” he said. “We can build a strong and developed city out of this devastation.”

President Mohammad Khatami visited later in the day, commenting, “Whatever we do, it will still be too little.”

Iranian officials are well aware that in the years before the 1979 Islamic revolution a series of earthquakes struck the country and the Shah’s administration proved both incompetent and indifferent to the population’s suffering, while Islamic groups led the humanitarian effort. These events played no small part in undermining the old regime.

Iran is located in an earthquake-prone region, with several of the earth’s tectonic plates pressing up against one another. These plates normally move only a fraction of an inch per year. According to the *Guardian*’s science editor, Tim Radford, “In practice, masses of rock that should ideally slide imperceptibly past each other become wedged fast at depth, locked for years. Then suddenly they give way, to shift at speeds of up to 5,000 mph over very short distances of a metre or thereabouts.” The violent movement produces powerful shockwaves traveling at the speed of sound. This was what happened Friday along the eastern edge of a landmass known as the central Iranian block, not far from the Pakistani border.

The provinces of Ghilan and Zandjan in northwestern Iran were the scene of what was previously the worst earthquake in recent history, in June 1990. Some 40,000-50,000 died in that disaster, which leveled 27 towns and more than 1,800 villages. At the time, the Iranian government refused foreign assistance, for which it was widely criticized.

Iranian and foreign critics were quick to note, however, that the human toll of the most recent earthquake was not simply a “natural disaster.” While Iran’s conservative media presented the quake as a test of “divine grace,” other commentators condemned the Islamic regime for failing to adopt stricter safety measures or enforce existing ones.

The English-language *Iran News* noted that it had written numerous “editorials and analyses on the need to take urgent and decisive earthquake measures.” Unfortunately, it noted, “those running our country do not seem to be listening.”

Estimates suggest that an earthquake of similar strength striking Tehran could kill as many as half a million people.

The reformist *Al-Sharq* newspaper, according to the BBC, attributed the high casualty toll to “the fault of mankind, who pay no attention to the laws of nature. ... Houses should be built with modern materials and not in flood plains or on quake faults, for

example.”

Another publication, *Etemaad*, blamed the number of deaths in Bam on the city’s mud-brick buildings. In Friday’s earthquake, other towns and villages in the area whose buildings were constructed primarily of wood fared far better.

Many Iranian critics pointed out that recommendations made by a series of high-level investigations following the 1990 disaster have never been implemented.

An article in the *Observer* provides some details about the housing and social situation in Bam. It notes that the former Iranian president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, came from the area and made sure that development funds poured in. A series of economic zones to encourage investment was created. Cheap housing was constructed for tens of thousands of migrant workers who moved to the town.

“Hotels, sports fields and a race track were built and international businesses moved in. ... But the city’s rapidly spiralling population needed housing. With corruption rampant and local building regulations barely enforced, it was easy for unscrupulous developers to construct flimsy multi-story buildings. The old homes of Bam’s centre, with their mud walls and domed roofs, collapse easily, but few of the contemporary builders bothered to improve on them. Instead they merely built new floors onto the weak lower storeys. Many new houses and offices had heavy new concrete roofs, supported by weak walls and foundations. With the earthquake striking while many people were still in bed, few stood a chance.”

Professor Mohsen Aboutorabi of the architecture department of the University of Central England told the *Guardian* that many of those killed in Friday’s earthquake died only because of poor building methods and a lack of proper regulation.

“There are building regulations, but they haven’t been enforced except for highrises,” commented Aboutorabi. “People are desperately in need of housing so the authorities overlook the code of building for earthquakes. ... On my last trip to Iran I banged two bricks together and they became like powder. Demand for materials is so high that manufacturers don’t stick to any standards. The cost of cement is very high, so they don’t use much.”

Many roofs, he noted, are supported by metal beams between traditional brick arches. “The ends of the beams sit freely on the walls, so with any shake, if one goes, the whole roof collapses,” Aboutorabi explained.



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