

Iran earthquake death toll tops 30,000

Poor planning, shoddy construction contribute to catastrophe

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The emergency response in Bam, Iran wound down Monday as most remaining international rescue teams left the devastated city. An earthquake measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale struck in the early morning hours of December 26, leveling up to 70 percent of Bam's structures, the majority built of mud bricks. The building collapses trapped the quake's victims in grey dust. The ancient desert settlement lies about 600 miles southeast of Tehran.

United Nations authorities estimate the final death toll at 30,000 to 32,000, down from a previous estimate of 35,000, although Iranian Red Crescent teams were unearthing more corpses as late as Monday, January 5, and the death toll may climb still higher. The wounded were equal in numbers to the dead, and tens of thousands remain homeless. While, amazingly, a 97-year-old woman was pulled alive from the rubble last Saturday, nine days after the quake, rescue workers hold out little hope of finding more survivors.

No section of the city was spared, with upscale housing collapsing along with the more modest homes. Two hospitals were destroyed and a prison on the edge of town was demolished, setting inmates free. Bam's most well-known tourist attraction, a seventeenth century, 38-tower mud-brick citadel, was destroyed.

In what was previously the worst earthquake in recent history, Ghilan and Zandjan provinces in northwestern Iran were hit by a devastating quake in June 1990, resulting in 40,000-50,000 deaths. The Iranian government was criticized at the time for refusing foreign assistance. Although the government has accepted aid in the latest catastrophe, there are many indications that the human tragedy in Bam—while the result of a natural phenomenon—has been exacerbated by slow response, poor planning and a lack of regard for safety standards on the part of local and national authorities.

At the peak of rescue efforts, there were 1,700 international relief workers from 30 countries in Bam.

The US has had no diplomatic relations with Iran since the 1981 hostage crisis, but the Bush administration, on the advice of top foreign policy advisors, decided to temporarily ease aid restrictions that ban aid to Iran. US military planes delivered emergency aid on December 28, and 80 US doctors and rescue workers arrived in Bam on December 30.

Bush insisted that the assistance didn't signal a change in US attitudes towards Iran, which he dubbed part of the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address. Nonetheless, the US gesture was widely viewed as a bid to influence Iran's internal situation, and some figures in the Iranian government charged that Washington was attempting to exploit the earthquake for political purposes.

Many international aid workers expressed frustration over difficulty in reaching the disaster site. Steve Owens told the *Independent* (December 30) that his team from British International Search spent 14 hours traveling less than 125 miles to the area. "We did not find anyone alive.... We were a day late getting to the site," Owens said. "When things like this happen, there should be ways to get teams in quicker."

In some cases, would-be rescue teams were stranded in their home countries, waiting for formal invitations from the Iranian government. According to the *Economist* (December 30), when teams did arrive at the small Bam airport there was no one on hand to take them to the parts of the city where their help was most needed.

Most of the Iranian Red Crescent's personnel and supplies have been concentrated in the quake-prone north of the country. Thousands of survivors in Bam spent two freezing nights waiting for the arrival of the tents they had been promised. Despite the substantial international response, aid workers on the scene said more assistance was needed for the estimated tens of thousands of injured and homeless. The Red Crescent asked foreign rescue teams to leave behind their specialized equipment.

Hamideh Khordoosta, 22, was one of only 10 survivors among several hundred residents of two rows of clay brick homes on either side of an alley in Bam that collapsed in the quake. Life here was typical of the city's neighborhoods. About a quarter of the men were unemployed, forcing many young couples to live with relatives. Heroin addiction, a widespread problem among the Baluchi people of eastern Iran, was common.

Hamideh told the *Guardian* (January 2), "Our sisters are dead, our children are dead, our parents are dead, our grief is endless. This is what it means to be lonely, having no one to share your sorrow." While her husband survived, she lost her grandmother, her sister, a dozen aunts and uncles, and many cousins.

The young woman was away from home when the quake hit and returned to assist in the rescue effort in her neighborhood. "I was pulling people from the rubble, but they were dead or dying all around me, people were dying everywhere." She pulled her neighbor's three-year-old daughter from the debris, but the girl then went into convulsions and died.

"For the first two days, there was nobody helping us," Hamideh told the *Guardian*. "The government said it was helping people but these were empty words. We had no one and I'm not a doctor. How could I know what to do with this child?"

Survivors complained that relief supplies were slow to arrive and that government authorities seemed insensitive to their suffering. Abas Barkhordor Baravati and his neighbors told the *Los Angeles Times* (December 30) they were insulted by relief workers tossing food to villagers. "We're not animals," he said.

Many Iranians in other parts of the country, distrustful of donating to a government relief fund, have given private donations, some even driving supplies themselves to the beleaguered region.

In response to the rising anger of survivors, top Iranian leaders toured the disaster scene on December 29, promising to restore the city. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei pledged that Bam would be rebuilt "stronger than ever." President Mohammad Khatami told reporters several hours later, "The scale of the catastrophe is so big that whatever has been done is not yet sufficient. I hope more and more aid will arrive in coming hours."

However, the government has been faulted for its slow response to the disaster, with criticism even to be found in the state-controlled media. A front-page editorial in the December 29 *Iran Daily*, the Islamic Republic News Agency's English-language web site, asked, "Will it be

business as usual after officials put small bandages on deep wounds and leave the scene?"

Iranian authorities have also been criticized for failure to enforce housing regulations put in place following the 1990 quake. Questions have been raised about Bam's substandard, mud-brick housing, with one member of parliament calling for the minister of housing to be prosecuted for failure to ensure the safety of Iran's construction.

Northern Iran sits on a major fault line about 50 miles long, and experts have predicted that an earthquake in Tehran could kill hundreds of thousands, or as much as 6 percent of the capital's population of 12 million. The Health Ministry also predicts a 7.0-scale quake would destroy 90 percent of the city's hospitals.

However, construction regulations are routinely ignored. Ali Bakhshi, a civil engineering professor in Tehran, told Reuters that builders disregard building codes to boost profits, while authorities look the other way.

Bahram Akasheh, professor of geophysics at Tehran University and a government adviser, commented, "The ground conditions in parts of Tehran are unfavorable: too soft, too brittle and too dangerous to build on if rules are ignored." With proper construction, cities can survive earthquakes even stronger than the one that hit Bam December 26. Last September, a quake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale in Japan resulted in no fatalities and only 500 injuries.

The last major earthquake to hit Tehran was in 1830. Following the Bam disaster Iranian authorities are reportedly considering moving the capital. Some have proposed transferring it to the central city of Isfahan, the country's capital in the late 16th century, but no timetable has been suggested.



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