

Eyewitness in Iran: Bam disaster threatens to ignite political powder keg

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On a recent visit, I was fortunate to have just left Bam less than 24 hours before the devastating earthquake hit the ancient city and surrounding villages in southeast Iran, killing at least 32,000 people. The terrible force of the quake and the aftershocks woke everyone 120 miles away in Kerman, where I was staying.

It is difficult to overestimate the social, economic and cultural impact of the earthquake on Bam, while being shocked and saddened at the catastrophe. As Sa'di, the great thirteenth century Iranian poet, famously wrote:

*The sons of man are limbs of one another,
Created of the same stuff, and none other.
One limb by turn of time and fate distressed,
The others feel its pain and cannot rest.
Who unperturbed another's grief can scan
Is no more worthy of the name of man*

More than 90 percent of this 2,000-year-old oasis town, surrounded by date palms, orange orchards and henna in the desert separating Iran from Pakistan, has been destroyed. Nearly half of the population died immediately, suffocated as they waited for help in the rubble of their poorly constructed homes, or froze to death without shelter. One-hundred-thousand people are now homeless. The town's two hospitals and its orphanage were levelled. Half the city's health care workers have been killed, hampering the rescue operation.

The number of casualties made Bam the world's most catastrophic earthquake since that which killed more than 250,000 people in the Chinese city of Tangshan in July 1976. Some survivors have been sleeping in tents close to the ruins of their homes. Others preferred to remain close to their belongings and where their loved ones perished. But now they could die of starvation or cold as temperatures drop to freezing at night. They are in desperate need of water and sanitation systems.

Tremors continue to rock Bam and the surrounding area. As a United Nations official said, "The suffering of the people of Bam has just started."

Of Bam's 40,000 children—representing half the city's population—at least half are believed to have died in the earthquake. Of those that survived, many are orphaned, having lost not just their parents but their extended families as well. Aid workers fear they could end up in dreadful institutions. As Brendan Paddy of Save the Children told *Observer* correspondent James Astill, "In one blow, thousands have been killed, injured or orphaned. Children are always the most vulnerable and these are practically helpless."

Bam was a city beset with social problems: isolation, poverty, high unemployment and drug addiction. People with skills and education had long since moved out. More recent migrants included members of the semi-nomadic Baluchi tribe. Unemployment was well above the national average of 21 percent, and now the few factories and workplaces that did exist have been destroyed.

While the orchards and palm trees are still standing, the quake has most

probably destroyed the ingenious system of underground canals or *qanats* that brought water from the mountains to the townspeople and irrigated the fields and orchards. The greenest fields amid the sandy steppe and desert are some of the most enduring images of the Iranian landscape. Tens of thousands of towns and villages exist thanks to this age-old technology believed to have been devised 2,500 years ago at the time of the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great.

A *qanat* is an underground canal sometimes more than 100 kilometres in length and between 10 and 30 metres deep. A shaft would be sunk to the permanent subterranean water level at the foot of snow-capped mountains. From there, a tunnel would be dug to carry water to a village, an oasis or even a single house. The tunnels would be lined with stone or tiles. Every 50 metres or so, further shafts were dug to remove spoil and provide air for the underground workers. The shafts are visible on the ground as a line of molehill-like mounds.

It required enormous skill and scientific understanding to achieve a straight line and the precise slope for gravity to propel the flow of water, and the system is testimony to the extraordinary level of culture achieved in ancient Persia. Any failure of the *qanats* could lead to the death of the entire village. The *qanats* are maintained to this day, and new ones are still being built. Engineers and agronomists from other arid regions of the world come to Iran to study this technique.

In areas such as Bam where rainfall is less than 250 millimetres, *qanats* are the lifeblood of the region. Without irrigation and industrialisation, it would mean a return to the semi-nomadic life of yesteryear.

As well as levelling the town, the quake has also destroyed what remained of the ancient city and its sixteenth century citadel, called Arg-e-Bam. Its red clay ruins are perched on a hill overlooking Bam. Covering an area of six square kilometres, it is the largest mud brick construction in the world. Typically Iranian are its sharply pointed broken arches, its domes, its tapering towers and walled enclosures.

Bam served as a *caravanserai* on the Silk Route. As such, it epitomised so much of ancient Persia. Situated at the centre of the known world, it served as the crossroads of the major trading routes, bringing the treasures of the Far East to Persia and Europe. Indeed, it is sad to realise that Persia—its poetry, literature, architecture, paradise gardens, miniatures and carpets, to name but a few aspects of its rich cultural history—played such a dominant role in the development of Western culture and yet is so little known and understood today.

A walk along the 12-metre-high ramparts and 38 towers surrounding the large number of houses and the seat of the governor was one of the most breathtaking sights in the world. Right at the top was a watchtower and pavilion that provided panoramic views over the endless desert to the north, the oasis town of Bam to the east and an impenetrable mountain range to the south.

While the old city was an important frontier and commercial post trading in agricultural produce, it fell to Afghan forces in 1719 and its economy never fully recovered. The citadel was partially dismantled in

the nineteenth century, and many of its people were moved to a new residential area nearby, also built of mud bricks. By 1958, few people remained in the old city that had fallen into disrepair.

The Iranian authorities brought in teams of architects, historians and builders to restore the old quarter. As one of Iran's top visitor attractions, the citadel provided an important livelihood for this isolated and impoverished town. Now that too has gone.

The same geological processes that have created Iran's mountains that rise up out of the ground without warning or foothills—rather like Ayers Rock (Uluru) in Australia—have also made Iran one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world. More than 70,000 people have died in quakes since 1990. Apart from the two most well-known ones in 1990 and 1997, there have been numerous quakes that have never made international headlines.

In 2002 alone, there were two devastating earthquakes. In June 2002, an earthquake registering 6.2 on the Richter scale struck Iran. About 230 people died and nearly 1,500 were injured. Three-hundred-and-seventy-three villages and four cities were affected. More than 33,000 homes were destroyed. The Iranian government put the damage at around \$257 million. As in Bam, the people most affected were the poorest—those living in mud-brick houses without the means to build quake-resistant structures.

In 1989, Iran drew up a seismic building code, but has failed to implement it consistently. The record of two cities, Golbaf and Ghaen, illustrates this. They were hit by quakes in the 1980s, rebuilt and hit again. In Golbaf, a strong quake had caused 1,500 deaths in 1981 but just five in 1991. In Ghaen, a second quake in 1997 killed another 1,500 people. While the newly built homes had been designed to withstand quakes, the difference in Ghaen was that the builders were allowed to cut corners.

Despite their history of earthquakes, the Iranian authorities were unprepared for the Bam quake. There were angry scenes on Iranian television as survivors railed against the government for its slow response and total disregard for safety standards. The English-language newspapers were full of criticisms of the authorities.

While the quake was a natural disaster, the scale of the devastation and the death toll was man-made. More severe earthquakes than Bam's 6.3 quake have not had such tragic consequences.

Bam's substandard mud-brick housing and the government's failure to enforce the housing regulations meant that, despite a worldwide rescue effort, few people were brought out alive. The rubble that came down on top of them asphyxiated them. While the government tried to deflect criticism from itself by pointing the finger at sloppy builders, everyone blamed the government for failing to regulate the builders and enforce their own standards.

I and other members of my party of tourists went immediately to the Red Crescent in Kerman where volunteers were organising the earthquake relief. Government teams and the clergy were nowhere to be seen. We found that people and shops had brought blankets and clothing. Trucks were leaving every few minutes for Bam. We offered to give blood, but were turned down. There were simply no facilities. We had raised several hundred dollars, but the Red Crescent was insistent that we go to the bank and put the money into its bank account to make sure that it did not go astray. Everywhere we went we saw collection points for money and provisions.

The "Supreme Leader," Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, and President Muhammad Khatami and their rival cliques went to Bam three days later. But they had little to offer. Khamanei pledged that the town would be rebuilt "stronger than ever" within the next two years. But that did not convince anyone.

The UN Flash Appeal report says that it will cost between \$700 million and \$1 billion to rebuild the city. While it appealed to the international donors for relief, it said that most would have to come from the Iranian government. Most of the survivors have already gone back to the villages their families had left a generation ago.

Khatami did not even try to make any bold claims. He said that the scale of the tragedy was so profound that the relief provided by the government and the people could not meet the demands of the victims.

The mullahs' political base lies with the *bazaaris*, the merchants who control much of Iran's retail trade, import-export trade and credit system.

The Iranian bazaar has a long history dating back to the fifth century, when public marketplaces moved inside the city walls. Over the centuries, they grew into entire communities, complete with shops, teahouses, restaurants, bathhouses, mosques, religious schools and *caravanserais*. They also developed into financial centres, with their own banking, credit and investment systems. Tehran's Grand Bazaar functions as both a stock exchange and a commodities market.

Far from being simple market traders, the *bazaaris*' stalls are just a front for their real businesses. It costs millions of *rials*, or hundreds of thousands of US dollars, to get a place in the bazaars. The combination of Iran's banking system, which prohibits usury or interest, and—until 2001—a system of multiple exchange rates means that the *bazaaris* act as moneylenders and use their position and powerful connections to buy currency at lower rates than the free market and thus import goods at costs far lower than domestic prices.

There has always been a close relationship between the *bazaaris* and the clerics. While the clerics needed the financial support of the *bazaaris* to fund the mosques and religious schools, the *bazaaris* needed the clerics to maintain their social standing. Their wealth and close links with the clergy gives them enormous political power. Whenever there is a major political crisis, the bazaar shuts down, paralysing economic and social life. It was the *bazaaris* that were instrumental in getting rid of the Shah and bringing the mullahs to power in 1978-79 in order to suppress the working class.

For years after the 1979 revolution, the relationship between the clergy and the bazaar was strong. This has been changing in recent years due to the elimination of the system of multiple exchange rates, anti-profiteering campaigns against the *bazaaris*, and a plummeting economy as the fall in oil prices, the long war against Iraq, and US led sanctions against Iran took their toll.

The mullahs preside over massive inequality and social problems. GDP

per capita has fallen by 30 percent since the 1970s, while inequality—always high—has soared to obscene levels. There is high unemployment. Independent trade unions are nonexistent and strikes are illegal. Inflation is rampant. The exchange rate gives some indication of this: there are about 9,000 rials to the US dollar.

Housing is scarce and costly. Several families share single-family accommodation. The population has almost doubled since 1978-79 and is approaching 70 million. Two thirds are under 30, and half are under 20. Not surprisingly, more than 200,000 young people leave Iran every year.

Two thirds of the population now live in the towns and cities, compared with just 31 percent in the late 1950s, adding to the pressure on housing, schools and jobs. Twelve million live in the capital, Tehran. Drab high-rise, shoddily constructed buildings in poorly designed developments have shot up everywhere. Many have already fallen into disrepair, while others are derelict.

For the last 10 years, Iran has had the largest refugee population in the world, estimated at 3 million at any one time. Most fled to Iran to escape the civil wars and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and live in the towns and villages of eastern Iran. But many moved to the cities, such as Shiraz in southwest Iran, in search of work. Kurdish refugees have also fled to Iran from the ethnic conflicts in northern Iraq and southeast Turkey, while others have fled the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh (Azerbaijan), northwest of Iran.

Drug taking is one way of inuring oneself to the desperate social crisis. Bordering on Afghanistan, where most of the world's opium, morphine and hashish are produced, Iran has easy access to drugs. According to government officials, more than 2 million Iranians take drugs (four tonnes of narcotics a day). Addiction is plain to see in the poorest neighbourhoods. The number of deaths is rising fast. Some 1,276 were reported in March-September 2002, a 58 percent increase over the same period in 2001. According to a recent *Economist* survey on Iran, 12 policemen are killed every month in a war against drugs that costs \$800 million a year. Over 60 percent of crime is drug-related and over 70 percent of AIDS cases, which are increasing fast, come from contaminated syringes.

Women and children are particularly vulnerable. It was with the utmost horror that I read in the newspapers that more than 15,000 homeless children had been “mopped up” in different cities during the first six months of the year. Nearly 13,000 of these were in the capital, almost 10 times the number in the previous year. Apparently, there are 200,000 officially acknowledged street children. Later I was to see them with my own eyes on the streets of Tehran.

Only 12 percent of the workforce are women, so they face a particularly poverty-stricken existence. There are a staggering 1.7 million homeless women. Most of them receive no welfare payments, and so, not surprisingly, prostitution is on the increase. Iran is said to have 300,000 prostitutes.

Iran is always portrayed as a deeply religious country that blindly follows the laws of the mullahs. But like so much else in Western propaganda regarding Iran, this is misleading. The mullahs may control the political establishment, set the school curriculum, outlaw alcohol, ban satellite television, censor the Internet, Western films, books and newspapers, and demand that women adopt the hideous “Islamic dress code,” but that does not mean they have the support of the broad mass of the population.

It was absolutely clear that both of the clerical factions, the conservatives and the so-called “reformers,” are deeply unpopular and treated with contempt. They are widely seen as corrupt and incompetent. The mullahs are sitting on a social powder keg and are forced to suppress opposition with the utmost brutality.

The London-based human rights organisation Amnesty International, in its 2002 report, said that scores of political prisoners, including prisoners

of conscience, have been arrested. Others continue to be held in prolonged detention without trial, or were serving jail sentences imposed after unfair trials. Some had no access to lawyers or to their families. The judiciary continued to restrict freedom of expression and association, and scores of students, journalists and intellectuals were detained. At least 113 people, including long-term political prisoners, were executed, frequently in public and some by stoning. A further 84 were flogged, many in public.

According to Reporters Sans Frontières, a Paris-based monitoring group, Iran had more journalists in prison in 2000 than any other country.

The earthquake at Bam, the result of a natural disaster cruelly exacerbated by a regime that has sought to suppress all political opposition and social dissent, has exposed the real relations between the government and the people.

No faction of the Iranian ruling class can resolve the immense problems of the region. That requires the development of a political movement to unite the peoples of the Middle East against their ruling elites and for the building of a socialist society. The creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East would remove the artificial borders that divide the peoples and economies of the region so as to enable its vast resources to be used to satisfy the needs of all the people.



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