

Death toll rises in Turkish earthquake

Stefan Steinberg
26 October 2011

The Turkish Disaster and Emergency Administration reported Tuesday that the death toll in Sunday's earthquake in the eastern part of the country had risen to 366, with an estimated 1,301 people injured. Many more casualties are expected to be reported in the coming days as rescue teams work to retrieve victims from the scores of devastated buildings that collapsed following the quake.

The earthquake struck at 10:41 GMT on Sunday, with its epicentre 16 kilometres northeast of Van, the capital city of the province of Van. Hundreds of buildings collapsed in Van and in the nearby town of Ercis. So far, the official total of collapsed buildings is 2,262. This number will rise as rescue units penetrate into the surrounding villages. Tens of thousands have been made homeless in the region as overnight temperatures plummet to the freezing point.

The quake struck a mainly Kurdish region which neighbors Iran and is blighted by poverty and unemployment. The principal reason for the high rate of casualties following the earthquake is the lack of proper building standards, a situation that prevails throughout Turkey but is especially prevalent in poor regions such as the province of Van.

All of Turkey lies in one of the world's most active seismic zones and is crossed by numerous fault lines. Two earthquakes in 1999 killed almost 20,000 people in densely populated parts of the northwest of the country.

Following those earthquakes two major causes for the high number of casualties were identified—the indifference of the government and the corrupt practices of building companies, which sought to maximise their profits by ignoring building regulations and using the cheapest possible materials to construct houses, offices and apartment blocks.

Following Sunday's earthquake, the political leadership in Ankara was quick to respond. Prime

Minister Tayyip Erdogan visited the region on the same day and declared, "Because the buildings are made of mud brick they are more vulnerable to quakes."

But while the government moved rapidly to show its face in the region, the quake made clear that nothing had changed for the better regarding building practices. Rescue workers discovered that primitive mud huts were not the only structures that collapsed. Among the devastated buildings were apartment blocks of up to seven stories. Scores of such buildings have been reduced to rubble.

Despite the promises by the Erdogan government to learn the lessons of 1999, this latest quake confirmed that corruption and malfeasance continue to plague the Turkish building industry.

According to one Turkish source speaking after the quake, there are seven ready-concrete companies in central Van and three in Ercis that consistently ignore safety regulations. And despite the risk of damage from earthquakes, only a small percentage of dwellings in the region are insured.

The chairman of the Turkish Catastrophe Insurance Pool (TCIP), Selamet Yaz?c?, told the Anatolia news agency, "Only 7,318 of the houses out of the total of 84,000 in the province were insured. This would mean only 9 percent of the houses are insured."

Social devastation and the high level of casualties resulting from mass poverty and the drive for profit by construction companies is not simply a Turkish problem.

A number of international scientists have recently drawn attention to the growing dangers arising from earthquakes across the globe. The latest quake in Turkey follows the devastating quakes in New Zealand this summer and quakes in Chile and Haiti in 2010. According to a recent paper in the science journal *Nature*: "Since the turn of the century, earthquakes have directly or indirectly (including tsunami) claimed

the lives of more than 640,000 people, four times more than in the preceding two decades, and proportionately more than the global increase in population would anticipate.”

A leading a professor of geological sciences at the University of Colorado, Roger Bilham, warned recently: “If buildings are not made earthquake resistant the toll is likely to continue to rise as cities grow in population.”

Sections of the Turkish political establishment are seeking to exploit the earthquake in Van to promote Turkish chauvinism. The province of Van has been the scene of fierce conflicts between Kurdish militants and the Turkish military. Only last week, the military responded to the death of 24 soldiers at the hands of Kurdish nationalists in the province of Hakkari, south of Van, by mobilising 22 army battalions, bombers and helicopter gun ships to attack positions of the Kurdish PKK on both sides of the Turkey-Iran border.

The offensive by the Turkish government against PKK rebels last week has encouraged extreme nationalist forces, who now seek to step up their campaign of hatred against the country’s Kurdish minority. On Twitter a number of comments gloated that Sunday’s earthquake was “divine punishment” for the deaths of the Turkish soldiers, while Turkey’s most popular daily newspaper *Hurriyet* included an opinion piece Tuesday entitled “Let’s Use the Earthquake to Beat the PKK.”



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