

Millions at risk in expected Istanbul earthquake

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12 March 2021

Recent official statements on an expected earthquake in Istanbul underscore that millions of people living in Turkey's largest city face an impending disaster due to official inaction.

On February 18, officials from the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) and the Esenler and Avcılar municipalities presented studies to the Turkish Parliament's Earthquake Measures Research Commission. The Esenler and Avcılar districts are in the high-risk category.

Their statements made clear that the dimensions of the destruction caused by an expected earthquake in Istanbul could be much greater than thought.

Speaking at the commission meeting, IMM Deputy Secretary General Mahir Polat said that it is estimated that 200,000 buildings in Istanbul will suffer moderate to severe damage in the expected earthquake. As a result, approximately three million people might be affected.

He said that the figures obtained as a result of building surveillance in the Avcılar region quadrupled previous estimates and doubled those in the Silivri region. "We predict that the number of buildings to be damaged across Istanbul will be double the most optimistic figure," he said, adding, "The number of buildings in Istanbul built before 2000 is 790,000."

Tayfun Kahraman, head of the IMM Department of Earthquake Risk Management and Urban Improvement, said that there are 1.16 million buildings in Istanbul. One-fifth will become unusable in a possible major earthquake, and many will risk complete collapse.

Stating that 48,000 buildings are expected to be damaged and risk collapse in a magnitude 7.5 earthquake in Istanbul, Kahraman said that they expect damages to water mains, waste water and natural gas systems in a major earthquake. Residents would also face the threat of severe epidemics, should an earthquake erupt amid a raging COVID-19 pandemic.

However, Haluk Sur, president of the Urban Transformation and Urbanization Foundation (KENTSEV), cited the data of Kandilli Observatory and Earthquake Research Institute and announced that there are 1,164,000 buildings registered in Istanbul and 4,500,000 residents in those buildings.

According to Sur's interview with the Anadolu Agency on February 23, 22 percent of all buildings in Istanbul were built before 1980. It is estimated that there are 1,051,000 residences, and 3,152,000 people live in these buildings. Given that even the youngest of these buildings are over 40 years old and many are 50 to 60 years old, residents of these buildings are expected to be at serious risk in a major earthquake.

In fact, many more buildings and people are at risk. After the Marmara earthquake on August 17, 1999, building construction regulations in Turkey were changed. In evaluations made so far for a possible earthquake in Istanbul, the year 2000, when the new regulations and laws went into effect, is taken as a landmark in terms of building construction.

The 790,000 buildings built before 2000 are considered risky in terms of materials and engineering. These buildings contain 3,054,123 residences. If these buildings contained the average number of 3.3 inhabitants per residence that prevails in the Istanbul area, the number of people in danger in an earthquake could be three times higher than the number cited by Sur.

These buildings are, moreover, concentrated in the working class districts of Istanbul.

Turkey is an earthquake-prone country, many of whose cities are built on active faults, and has a disastrous earthquake record. In the 1999 Marmara earthquake, official reports said about 18,000 people lost their lives, and more than 25,000 were injured. Unofficial reports estimated that the real death toll was 50,000, and there were 100,000 injured.

A 2011 earthquake in the eastern province of Van left more than 600 dead and nearly 4,200 injured. In the 6.8 magnitude earthquake in Elaz?? on January 24 last year, 41 people died and more than 1,600 were injured. After the 6.9 magnitude earthquake off the Samos Island of Greece on October 30, 2020, 117 people died, 1,034 were injured and 15,000 were left homeless in the Turkish city of Izmir.

As scientists continue to warn of dangers, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's Justice and Development Party (AKP) national government as well as municipal governments, including those under the control of the opposition parties, are wasting valuable time and concealing official crimes by preparing only optimistic reports on the earthquake.

While the government undoubtedly bears the main responsibility for this great destruction and death endangering millions of workers, the opposition parties are also complicit in the earthquake disasters caused by the capitalist profit system. Last year, the report prepared by the IMM, controlled by the Republican People's Party (CHP), claimed that there would be only 14,000 deaths after a 7.2-magnitude earthquake in Istanbul, where 16 million people live.

"This is not true," well known geologist Professor Naci G?r?r stated bluntly, describing the dangers facing millions of working people in Istanbul. "A simple account: there are 1.6 million buildings. Let's reduce all mortal cases to one percent in Istanbul. This means 16,000 buildings. Suppose that each building has four floors. It means 64,000 floors. If we think two apartments on each floor, it means 128,000 apartments. Put four people in each apartment. Does it exceed 400,000 [deaths]?"

Research carried out especially after the 1999 earthquake shows that the anticipated earthquake on the North Anatolian Fault Line will likely be at least magnitude 7.2 in the Marmara Sea, off Istanbul. This would cause a disaster not only in Turkey's biggest city, but also in neighboring industrial cities such as Kocaeli, Bursa and Tekirda?.

Nonetheless, the ruling class and governments from all establishment parties have done nothing against this coming disaster in Istanbul, where 16 million people live, or almost 20 percent of Turkey's population. Instead of preparing for a massive earthquake that scientists have warned about for years, the wealth created by the workers has been transferred to the capitalist class.

For years especially in Istanbul, "urban transformation,"

which has been presented as an earthquake preparedness measure, has been a way to drive working class residents from the city centre and build luxury residences for the affluent. The underlying aim of this policy is not to protect residents from earthquakes but to boost profits for construction firms and enrich the wealthiest layers of society.

At the same time, workers are consigned to districts where buildings are largely older and risk turning into death traps in a major earthquake.

This is all the more politically criminal in that tens of thousands of residences remain empty in Istanbul, and the technology and labor exist to rapidly build hundreds of thousands of homes. Such solutions are not implemented by the ruling class and its political representatives, however, because they cut across the profit interests of the construction firms and the political objectives of the capitalist state.

The Erdo?an government is allocating billions of Turkish liras to a canal project between the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea, "Canal Istanbul." At the same time, construction contractors are receiving billions of liras in tax relief, and hundreds of billions are being transferred to the financial oligarchy in bailout money after the pandemic. It is then claimed that there is no money for urban transformation to save hundreds of thousands, even millions of lives.

The contrast between the capitalist system based on private profit and the basic needs of society was recently revealed in the disastrous official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent breakdown of electricity supplies in the US state of Texas.

A massive plan of public works is necessary to reconstruct cities across the world threatened by natural disasters based on scientific planning and the highest level of security to provide everyone with the fundamental right to safe housing. The implementation of this solution requires the conscious struggle to transfer power to the working class—in a struggle for international socialism, based on planning global economic life around social needs not private profit.



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