

Earthquake budget conflict erupts in disaster-prone Istanbul as scientists ring alarm bells

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In an interview on the TVNET channel last week, well-known geologist Prof. Dr. Naci Görür said that a expected earthquake in the Marmara Sea would affect many cities, including Istanbul, and warned the authorities again to take urgent measures as soon as possible.

His remarks were an indictment not only of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which has been in power since 2002, but also of the bourgeois opposition parties that govern various metropolitan municipalities.

Asked what he thought about the claims that Republican People's Party (CHP)-run Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's (İBB) decision to reduce its earthquake-related expenditures by two-thirds in its 2023 general budget, Görür condemned the lack of adequate budget allocations against earthquakes.

In a city where an impending major earthquake is expected to have a catastrophic impact on millions of people, AKP officials claim that 1.8 billion liras have been allocated for earthquakes in the 2023 budget, while İBB Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu said in a statement that "We allocated 4.9 billion liras for earthquakes in the 2023 budget. 2.2 billion liras of this will be spent on urban transformation."

Underscoring that it is not right to act slowly on this matter, Görür stated that the expected earthquake should be the first issue of all officials at the national and local levels.

Görür, one of Turkey's most respected earthquake scientists, had strongly opposed a report prepared by İBB in 2021 that estimated that only 14,000 deaths would occur in a possible major earthquake in Istanbul, a city of around 16 million people.

"This is not true," he 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 1 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]?"

Last year, Associate Professor Dr. Doğan Kalafat said that "the probability of a 7-magnitude earthquake in Marmara by 2030 is 64 percent." While this probability continues to increase every year, such an earthquake is expected to have devastating effects in cities such as Bursa, Balıkesir, Tekirdağ, Kocaeli and Yalova, and especially in Istanbul.

It is known that such large earthquakes have previously occurred in the region at intervals of about 250 years. According to historical records, the last severe earthquake in the Marmara Sea occurred just over 250 years ago, in 1766, destroying various settlements.

After the CHP's Ekrem İmamoğlu won elections in Istanbul in 2019, the Istanbul Planning Agency (İPA) organized the "Istanbul Earthquake Workshop" on December 2-3, 2019. The workshop report, titled "Istanbul's Main Agenda: Earthquake," revealed the risks Istanbul faces from a possible earthquake. According to the IPA report, the number of buildings that would suffer light, medium and high damage in a 7.5 magnitude earthquake was estimated to reach 500,000, while 48,000 of these buildings were expected to be heavily damaged.

Mehmet Çakır, the Istanbul municipality's Secretary General at the time, said in the closing remarks at the workshop: "If we had talked about how to transform buildings as much as we have been talking about fault lines for 20 years, we would be at very

different points today [in preparation for an earthquake].”

The report declared: “After years lost to ensure the safety of life and property of citizens in the face of earthquakes, what needs to be done now is that all stakeholders should work in coordination under the leadership of reason and science to make Istanbul a more resilient, livable and sustainable city.”

The report also warned: “Otherwise, it will be too late to take risk mitigation measures in the face of a devastating earthquake and will have to cope with irreparable losses. Without action, Istanbul’s earthquake could become Turkey’s disaster.”

In one of the opening speeches of the workshop, Imamo?lu said, “The most important issue to be prioritized in Istanbul is the earthquake and the safety of life and property that will be affected by the earthquake. Our aim is to raise awareness and make the city prepared for all disasters, especially earthquakes, in Istanbul and all over Turkey.”

The Istanbul municipality’s cutting of earthquake preparedness funds, ignoring the results of its own scientific studies, turns a blind eye to the mass deaths that would occur in a major earthquake—just as the Erdo?an government and AKP municipal administrations have done for years.

In 2019, ?mamo?lu was the candidate of the “Nation Alliance” of the CHP and its far-right ally, the Good Party, supported by the Kurdish-nationalist Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and the pseudo-left. He defeated an AKP candidate who had ruled Istanbul for decades.

In his campaign, ?mamo?lu criticized the AKP-run municipal administration for not making earthquake preparations in Istanbul. His election promises included building 100,000 houses in five years and preparing the city for earthquakes. Imamo?lu’s administration, now in its fourth year, proved just as indifferent to urban transformation and earthquake preparedness. It expresses the utter indifference of the ruling class to the life and health of the working masses.

For years, “urban transformation” in Istanbul, 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 fundamental 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.

While traces of this transformation can be seen in wealthier neighborhoods in the center of the city, the older building stock, which constitutes a large part of the workers’ neighborhoods largely ignored by construction companies, is waiting to collapse on millions of people in an 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 safe 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.

While the Erdo?an government is undoubtedly mainly responsible for this great destruction and death endangering millions of working people, the bourgeois opposition parties and the pseudo-left tendencies that support them are also complicit in these preventable disasters by not taking any measures against the earthquake.

The antagonism between the capitalist system based on profit and private property and the basic needs of people has been recently seen in the destructive “profits before lives” response to the COVID-19 pandemic by capitalist governments all over the world.

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 a conscious struggle for workers’ power—in a struggle for international socialism, based on planning global economic life around social needs, not private profit.



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