

The capitalist economics and imperialist geopolitics behind the earthquake disaster in Turkey

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Yesterday, two powerful earthquakes shattered the Turkish-Syrian border region. A 7.7 magnitude quake centered in the southern Turkish city of Kahramanmara? in the early morning was followed by a massive aftershock, of magnitude 7.6 in the afternoon. The quakes, felt as far away as Lebanon and Cyprus, have left thousands dead and tens of thousands desperately awaiting rescue, buried under the rubble.

In Turkey, the quakes destroyed at least 6,200 buildings, killed 2,921 people and injured 16,000 in 10 cities, where over 15 million people live. Hospitals, roads and airports all have been destroyed or damaged, and damage to electricity transformers and natural gas lines is leading to widespread power and gas outages.

In Syria, devastated by the NATO alliance’s 12-year war for regime change, the confirmed death toll has already exceeded 1,300. The ongoing war is preventing rescue teams from reaching many areas. Parts of northwest Syria are under the control of the Turkish army and its Islamist proxies, while northeastern Syria is under the control of US forces and their Kurdish nationalist allies.

Tragically, with many people still trapped under collapsed buildings in both Turkey and Syria, the death toll is set to rise substantially. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to spend the night in freezing temperatures or in buildings damaged by the earthquake. The World Health Organization has warned that the death toll may rise eight-fold, to nearly 30,000.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government has declared seven days of national mourning, but people across the earthquake zone are largely being left to cope on their own.

With only 9,000 Turkish rescue workers mobilized,

no official teams have yet arrived in many places. Miners from various provinces are volunteering to go to the region to join search-and-rescue efforts. While the Turkish government boasts of producing killer drones and long-range missiles capable of hitting Athens, people trying to rescue their friends and loved ones from under the rubble are being left to work with picks and shovels.

The callous reaction of the financial oligarchy to the disaster was summarized by the Istanbul stock exchange: After the earthquake, shares of cement companies soared.

The massive death toll from these earthquakes is an entirely preventable and widely foreseen tragedy. It is, in reality, not primarily a natural disaster, but a social crime for which the capitalist system bears responsibility.

Yesterday’s earthquakes occurred in the world’s second-most seismic region, the so-called “Alpide Belt.” Located on major fault lines, it has a long record of earthquake disasters. The 1999 Marmara earthquake in Turkey killed nearly 18,000 people and injured tens of thousands more, according to official statistics.

Scientists had increasingly warned that yesterday’s disaster was imminent and implored public authorities to strengthen buildings, warning that failing to do so would come at a horrific cost in lives.

After the Elaz?? earthquake in January 2020 in Turkey, Hüseyin Alan, the chairman of the Chamber of Geology Engineers, stated that besides ?stanbul, 18 city centers—including Kahramanmara? and Hatay, which suffered major damage from yesterday’s quake—are on “active faults with high potential to produce earthquakes.” In a major earthquake, buildings there

would be “destroyed,” he stated.

Prof. Dr. Naci Görür, one of Turkey’s most respected geologists and advocates of building earthquake-resistant cities, has long pointed to the comparison between Japan and Turkey. He wrote that only four people died from earthquake damage from the 7.4-magnitude quake in Fukushima in 2022, while nearly 20,000 people died in the 1999 Marmara earthquake of the same magnitude. This underscores that virtually all the deaths in yesterday’s quake in Kahramanmara? could have been avoided.

Görür has been drawing attention to the danger of major earthquakes in this region for years. In a TV program last night after the earthquake, Görür said his team had prepared a project to prevent these losses, but that the authorities had ignored it.

Görür once again warned of a major Istanbul earthquake. A magnitude 7 quake is expected in this mega-city of at least 16 million. While Istanbul City Hall, controlled by the bourgeois opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), claims it would cause “only” 14,000 deaths, Görür predicts that the actual death toll could exceed 400,000.

Building earthquake-resistant housing is a critical global problem that capitalism has proved incapable of solving. A 2021 article in the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* by Chinese, Australian, US, Canadian and German scientists found that in 2015, a staggering 1.5 billion people lived in earthquake-prone areas. This number is rising rapidly, mainly in vulnerable countries of the Middle East and Central and South Asia such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Today, the level of development of science and industry is such that earthquake-resistant cities could be built worldwide. Why has social infrastructure gone constantly neglected and the call to redesign cities and renovate buildings to make them earthquake-resistant been ignored, as have appeals to prepare for post-earthquake rescue and treatment?

Yesterday’s earthquakes occurred at the epicenter of the US-led NATO powers’ three-decades long campaign of imperialist wars in the Middle East following the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria have cost trillions of dollars and millions of lives. Syria has been devastated by a 12-year NATO proxy war that has

cost over 500,000 lives and displaced over 10 million people.

Many Syrian refugees who fled Syria to save their lives, and today live in poverty in southern Turkey, have been abandoned to their fate after the earthquake.

Dozens of NATO states have made token statements about sending aid to their NATO ally Turkey, while largely ignoring the victims of the same disaster in Syria, which remains under a crippling US sanctions regime that denies its population access to medical and other resources desperately needed not only to confront the current catastrophe but to sustain daily life.

In reality, the leaders of the imperialist governments, who hypocritically offer condolences to earthquake victims, are primarily responsible for the war in Syria and the catastrophic squandering of social wealth on war, rather than on public health and safety.

All major social issues today, including averting natural disasters, are by nature global problems requiring a socially coordinated solution. Yet the private profit interests of the bourgeoisie and the division of the world into rival nation-states stand in the way of any progressive response. This is why there has been no worldwide scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic or to global climate change.

Instead, the imperialist powers, whose criminal “let it rip” policies on the COVID-19 pandemic have led to the deaths of over 21 million people globally, now threaten all humanity with World War III by escalating their war on Russia in Ukraine.

The obstacle to a planned, rational response to urgent social problems can only be removed by a frontal attack by the international working class on the power and wealth of the ruling class, thereby subordinating private profit to social need. The preventable devastation of yesterday’s earthquakes has demonstrated once again the urgent necessity of replacing capitalism with global socialism.



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