

As death toll in Turkey-Syria earthquake rises, Erdoğan government seeks to cover up responsibility

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13 February 2023

Yesterday evening, the official death toll from the Kahramanmara? earthquakes had reached 31,643 in Turkey and 4,614 in Syria. Nine days after the quake, search and rescue operations continue in a small number of places, and it is unknown how many thousands of people are still under the rubble.

International search and rescue teams have warned that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan government’s decision to use construction equipment to directly enter the rubble will lead to deaths, not rescues. “We will not be part of this,” a member of the Spanish team told RTVE on his way home.

The bodies of 1,302 Syrian refugees, who died on the Turkish side of the border due to the earthquake, were brought back to Syria, according to *Al Jazeera*. In Syria, ravaged by NATO’s war for regime change and imperialist sanctions, the risk of outbreaks like cholera is rising. “There was a perfect storm brewing before the earthquake—of increasing food insecurity, collapsing health care systems, the lack of access to safe water and poor sanitation,” Eva Hines, chief of communications for UNICEF in the Syrian capital, Damascus, told *Al Jazeera*.

In Turkey, Erdoğan’s government has launched investigations into several contractors of buildings that collapsed in the earthquake. A few have been arrested. The scapegoating of a number of contractors is intended to cover up the responsibility of the government, which did almost nothing to prepare for the earthquake before and after, paving the way for massive destruction and loss of life.

The Progressive Lawyers Association (ÇHD) filed a criminal complaint yesterday against those responsible for this cover-up. Its statement declared: “We filed a criminal complaint against ministers, governors and AFAD officials who are responsible for the loss of hundreds of lives due to their negligence and inadequacies in preparation before and response after the earthquake.”

The statement continued: “We have previously filed a criminal complaint against all those responsible for the

destruction. [State] Institutions that clearly failed to prepare for the earthquake in terms of search, rescue, debris removal and post-rescue assistance are also responsible for the damage they deepened after the disaster!”

As the Chamber of Architects conducted inspections in the earthquake-hit provinces of Adana, Osmaniye and Hatay, Chamber of Architects Ankara Chair Tezcan Karaku? Candan said, “We observed that the destruction in the affected region was massive. In the provinces where the aftershocks continue, many heavily and medium-damaged buildings endanger human life. People under serious threat are struggling to survive on the streets under very difficult conditions.”

Candan added, “We are very worried about how those who have not been able to reach out to earthquake victims under the rubble for six days will be able to raise these cities to their feet. Especially in Hatay, there is a serious destruction in the new buildings stock.” She added:

From the massive destruction in the new building stock, we have observed that the earthquake regulations issued after the 1999 [Marmara] quake were not implemented, and that no lessons were learned from the earthquakes. In our investigations, we found that our warnings on urbanization and construction in earthquake zones were ignored, and that geological and ground survey studies were incomplete during the preparation of zoning plans.

A Master’s thesis on Antakya, the central district of Hatay, published in 2019 found that “80 percent of the buildings in the urban area consist of risky structures. Although these facts have been put forward in reports, and it is known that this city is in urgent need of transformation, no significant work has been done on this issue to date.”

In his article yesterday, daily *Cumhuriyet* Terko?lu quoted an earthquake warning letter and a scientific report sent by Hüseyin Alan, chair of the Chamber of Geological Engineers, to several state institutions, including the Presidency and AFAD, in March 2021. The letter and report were about Mara?, which would be the epicenter of the 2023 earthquake.

“Mara? sits directly on live fault lines or zones. It is necessary to urgently initiate a series of studies to prevent our province of Kahramanmara? from being affected by earthquake damage,” he wrote in his letter, before adding: “Many settlements in Kahramanmara? sit on ground units with poor engineering properties.”

According to Terko?lu, Alan suggested in his letter, “The city should be re-planned according to the map of the live fault lines. Existing buildings must be reviewed and urban transformation work must be carried out. An earthquake plan must be prepared in Mara?.”

The attached scientific report also stated:

Kahramanmara? is expected to be damaged in an earthquake larger than 6.5-magnitude due to both the severe shaking and the danger of surface faulting. In this case, the wisest approach would be to bring the buildings up to code to withstand earthquake shaking.

But the vital warnings of Alan and many other scientists have gone unheeded. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in yesterday’s *Perspective*, it was not because the Erdoğan government lacked economic resources or any other material shortcoming. Rather, it was “entirely due to the financial considerations of Turkish and global capitalism, which reject spending on long-term infrastructure, such as ensuring buildings in major fault zones are able to withstand earthquakes, in favor of short-term maximization of profits.”

The fact that disregarding the lives and safety of the people is a ruling class policy can be seen in the latest “construction amnesty” vote in 2018. Eight deputies of the so-called “opposition” Republican People’s Party (CHP) voted “yes” to the regulation brought to parliament by Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) before the June 2018 elections to legalize buildings without the required safety certificates.

Although only five “no” votes came from the Kurdish nationalist People’s Democratic Party (HDP), 43 HDP deputies did not participate in the vote. While no one from the CHP voted “no,” 123 deputies did not participate in the

columnist In short, the “~~opposition~~” MPs who did not participate in the vote and the bourgeois opposition parties as a whole allowed the law to pass and became accomplices to the government’s crime.

The first words of a survivor in Hatay were a striking example of how the lives and health of people are devalued by the entire political establishment in the service of the capitalist system. According to news reports, Emine Do?u, 51 years old, was rescued from under the rubble at the 138th hour. She told emergency health workers who examined her immediately after the rescue: “I have no money. Please don’t take me to a private hospital.”

Meanwhile, aid volunteer Ali Nusret Berker’s interview with the *Independent Türkçe* yesterday confirmed claims that tens of thousands of people were abandoned to their fate under the rubble in the quake-affected area, where 13 million people live in Turkey.

Berker said that after the earthquake, he and his friends came to the region on their own and tried to participate in rescue and relief efforts in Hatay’s Samanda? district. The AFAD team they contacted in the district told them, “We scanned all the buildings here. Most of them [under the rubble] are already dead. Don’t go in vain. Better you go back.”

According to the interview, they refused to accept this advice: “Berker and his fellow volunteers claim that at least 350 people were subsequently pulled alive from under the rubble of the buildings.”

“If we had been provided with equipment support, maybe half of the people we lost would have come out alive,” he said, adding that there was only a team of 13 people with them in Samanda?, which has a population of 120,000. “We really began to rescue people with our own efforts. But during this time, we started not to hear the voices of the people we heard. We started to lose them. And every government agency we called refused us. We really can’t comprehend what kind of logic there is in leaving people to die.”



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