

“We saw the first state officials three days after the earthquake”

A preventable disaster: Antioch, Turkey once again razed by earthquake

Hakan Özal
16 February 2023

Hatay’s Antakya district, which includes the historic city of Antioch, was among the worst hit last week by the two earthquakes of magnitude 7.7 and 7.6, which affected 10 provinces in Turkey and demolished northern Syria.

Life came to a standstill after the earthquake. Electricity, natural gas and water were cut off, while almost all buildings collapsed or were damaged. Telephone networks went offline. The city was cut off from the world. Tens of thousands were trapped under the rubble. Those who managed to leave the buildings got out of bed at dawn and spent dozens of hours outside in cold weather with their children, elderly and sick relatives, desperately waiting for help to arrive. According to official reports, over 7,000 people lost their lives in Hatay.

A major earthquake was not unexpected. Scientists have long warned of the danger to the city, which has repeatedly suffered great destruction in history. Indeed, Antakya is located on three fault lines: these are the Dead Sea Transform fault extending from the Red Sea to the Amik basin; the East Anatolian Fault; and the Cyprus fault.

Some of the earthquakes with the highest loss of life in history have occurred in Antakya. In February 2021, the *9.Köy* news website pointed to the history of documented earthquake disasters in the region, which stretches back to the Roman empire: An estimated 260,000 people lost their lives in a 7.5 magnitude earthquake in December 115; On May 29, 526, a magnitude 7 earthquake killed around 250,000 people in the city; 80,000 people died in the earthquake in September 458; 60,000 on October 31, 588; 20,000 in 847; 80,000 on June 30, 1170; and 20,000 on December 7, 1759.

In the August 13, 1822 Aleppo Earthquake, Gaziantep, Antakya and Şlahiye, as well as Latakia and Aleppo, which are today in Syria, were destroyed and tens of thousands of people lost their lives. On April 3, 1872, the whole of Antakya and Samandaş were destroyed in the earthquake. On April 8, 1951, 13 buildings collapsed in Şkenderun and 6 people died.

Though it was well-known that Antakya is an earthquake zone, and experts have warned of a major earthquake for years, this has been ignored by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been in power for 20 years, and by

local authorities.

Unlike in Roman or medieval times, science and technology today allow humanity to construct buildings that withstand even massive earthquakes without any loss of life. However, life-saving measures were not taken before or after the earthquake. Despite the enormous scientific advances made over the span of millenia, tens of thousands died preventable deaths.

On December 18, 2022, after an earthquake hit Antakya with no loss of life, Rasim Can, Hatay Provincial Representative of the Chamber of Geological Engineers, said: “Earthquakes are not a natural disaster, they are a fact of nature, and we are the ones who turn them into a disaster. As long as we live in this geography, we need to accept the reality of earthquakes and take strict precautions.” He listed the measures as follows:

- 1) A fault law must be enacted urgently [in the parliament].
- 2) Gathering places should be created.
- 3) Buildings built on weak soils and unsafe buildings built with sea sand should be demolished and earthquake-resistant buildings should be built instead.
- 4) The buildings to be constructed should be in accordance with the Earthquake Code, under strict supervision.
- 5) Urban transformation should be done regionally, not on a building-by-building basis.
- 6) Educate the public about earthquakes.

In February 2021, Can told *9.Köy* that many buildings in Hatay are built on problematic ground, saying: “High-rise buildings were built on unstable ground. Moreover, sea sand was used. The high-rise buildings in Hatay, especially the old ones, were built by transporting sea sand from Samandaş.”

He added: “The sea sand has rotted the iron in the buildings and the old buildings have no strength left. High-rise buildings built with sea sand need to be reviewed.”

In the same interview, Hatay Chamber of Architects Branch Chair Mustafa Özçelik stated that in light of the Earthquake Code issued after the 1999 Marmara earthquake that killed over 17,000 people, “Buildings before 2000 are considered unsafe. There are too many old and unsafe buildings in Antakya and Şkenderun. These buildings should be identified quickly and

urban transformation should be done not as buildings but as neighborhoods. These buildings are too unsafe for an earthquake zone. This problem can be solved with mobilization.”

However, some buildings built after 2000 were also destroyed in the February 6 earthquake. Indeed, in some cases the Earthquake Code was not implemented by the authorities. Construction amnesties enacted by the parliament granted legal status to buildings that do not comply with safety regulations. Moreover, there was almost no open area left for people to gather after a major earthquake hit the city.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to earthquake victims in Antakya. Volkan, who works as a music teacher, said that their building did not collapse during the earthquake, and that he went outside with his wife and children aged 5 and 7 immediately. However, they could not find a safe, open area: “It was like doomsday outside. There was no open area where we could take shelter. It was cold and raining heavily. Hundreds of people were pushing each other, looking for a place to escape from the buildings that kept shaking with aftershocks.”

Volkan continued: “Although it was very risky, I had no choice but to take my car out of the garage on the lower floor of the building where we live. The only way out of the area was by car. Meanwhile, the screams of people trapped under the rubble were mingling with the shouts of people fleeing around the buildings. We took our neighbors who didn’t have cars in my small car. There were eight of us in total.”

In apocalyptic conditions, he said, people tried to save their families as buildings collapsed: “We tried to drive through the street where buildings continued to collapse due to aftershocks. But traffic was blocked. Some people had heart attacks in front of our eyes. No one could help anyone. We finally reached the garden of the school where I worked, which was also very crowded. There were no toilets. Cars were running because it was cold, so it was very difficult to breathe. But it was the only place nearby where there was no risk of buildings collapsing on us.”

Volkan said that people who were rescued from their homes or from the rubble did not have basic necessities such as water, food, and clothing: “One day later, our car’s battery died. Many cars had no fuel. We were waiting for help from the first moments of the earthquake. Forty-eight hours passed, but no help came from anywhere. We were afraid that our children would freeze. On the morning of the third day of the earthquake, we survived because people from other cities voluntarily came to help us.”

The WSWS also spoke to Burcu, who ran a flower shop and lived on the third floor of an apartment building in Antakya before the earthquake.

She said: “As soon as the earthquake hit, my husband and I went to the room of our children, aged 8 and 5, and embraced them. It was like we were in an elevator. We were going down

[with the building]. We bent down to the ground. There was a one-meter gap between the ceiling and the ground. The wind was blowing from an exploded wall. We crawled towards it and suddenly we found ourselves outside.”

She continued: “We ran barefoot in the rainy and cold weather to our car on the side of the street. But our car was buried under the cave-in. Then we followed people moving in a certain direction. We gathered in a school yard with people from the neighborhood. Our children were shivering from cold and fear. A family took our children in their car. My husband and I waited outside in the rain, barefoot, for help to arrive.”

Burcu, her family and others in the schoolyard also survived with the help of volunteers after a long wait: “After 60 hours, a volunteer from another city gave us blankets, water and biscuits. We saw the first state officials only three days after the earthquake. We lost our workplace, our home and our city, and we were the only family to survive in our building. Our only consolation is that our children are alive.”

Earthquake victims in Antakya, like many other people in the affected region, say that the state came to help too late. The fact that volunteers started search-and-rescue operations and delivered vital necessities like blankets, water and food to earthquake victims before state officials did, exposes the government’s horrific lack of preparedness for the earthquake.

This indifference of the government, and the ruling class as a whole, to the safety of the people led to the collapse of tens of thousands of buildings and the deaths of thousands of people who could have been pulled out alive from under the rubble.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact