

Who is responsible for earthquake deaths in Turkey?

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Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez's well-known novel, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, tells the story of a murder that many people knew was going to happen that they did not act to prevent.

The February 6, 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake, which destroyed tens of thousands of buildings in both countries and killed over 42,000 people, presents a different version of this story. Many reports by experts, and even by state officials, have predicted earthquakes along Turkey's fault lines on a scientific and historical basis for years. Yet, Turkish state officials and businesses took no action to prevent tens of thousands of entirely predictable deaths.

The government, which is responsible for earthquake safety, as well as the entire political establishment, municipalities and official institutions, ignored these scientific findings. They willfully turned a blind eye to the murder that would be committed. Millions of people lived in buildings that it was known would collapse or be heavily damaged in a major earthquake. In this real-life version of García Márquez's novel, "social murder" was committed as tens of thousands of people died preventable deaths, trapped under the rubble.

In contrast, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since 2002, is trying to cover up its undeniable crime in failing to prepare for and take precautions against earthquakes in a quake-prone country. On the one hand, it uses pro-government media to claim that the "earthquakes were too big" and that "one cannot be prepared for such earthquakes." On the other, it tries to pin responsibility for the disaster solely on the contractors and other low-level criminals who built the buildings.

Undoubtedly, major perpetrators implicated in this social murder include contractors who build buildings that violate existing safety regulations, and refuse to pay for the necessary materials, labor and engineering services in order to make extra profit. However, it is the capitalist political establishment as a whole that has built the system that allows contractors to skirt essential safety regulations.

The vast profits in construction, which has dominated Turkey's economy and politics in recent decades, have attracted enormous interest and investment. As of 2017, there were around 330,000 registered contractors in Turkey, a country of 85 million people, with 60,000 contractors registered in the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce alone. However, it is estimated that there are only 3,800 contractors in Germany, with a population of 83 million, and 20,000 or 30,000 contractors in the whole of Europe.

Construction has come to the forefront in Turkey as an industry backed and developed by the state, creating wealth and, of course, financing bourgeois politics. Regulations on construction have repeatedly been rewritten, while authority to inspect and approve projects has been taken from professional organizations like the Union of Chambers of Turkish Architects and Engineers (TMMOB).

The government has amended the State Procurement Law 192 times since its enactment in 2003, clearing all obstacles to the AKP's favoritism of party contractors. The Hatay Airport, which was badly damaged by the earthquake, several highways that were destroyed, and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) office building that collapsed in Hatay were all built by AKP contractors. These demolitions also played an important role in delaying official search-and-rescue and relief efforts.

“Construction amnesties” played a decisive role in preventable destruction. Eight “amnesties” were issued during the AKP era, making it legally impossible to inspect many buildings.

Despite the crocodile tears shed by ruling circles after the earthquake, the entire political establishment—both allies of the AKP and “opposition” parties—are implicated in this. In line with laws enacted by all parties in parliament, the Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change Ministry opened areas that scientifically should not be opened to settlement.

Municipalities have issued building permits without inspecting projects built in earthquake-prone areas, the Building Inspection institutions have not properly inspected these buildings, and engineers have not provided their services to these structures. From top to bottom they are all implicated in social murder in the affected areas.

Most recently, in 2018, a so-called “construction amnesty” was implemented “to solve the zoning problem of unlicensed buildings built before December 31, 2017.” Approximately 10 million people benefited from this law, which “legalized” unsafe illegal structures, most of which were built without supervision and without any engineering services. As a result, 16 billion Turkish liras were collected from building owners as “building registration certificate fees” and transferred to the state treasury.

A total of 294,000 owners of illegal buildings in the 10 provinces devastated by the earthquake benefited from this amnesty. Had it not been for last week’s earthquakes, another zoning amnesty would likely have been issued, in line with a legislative proposal submitted by the fascist Grand Unity Party (BBP), an ally of Erdoğan’s AKP, and with the support or connivance of so-called “opposition” parties, as in the past.

It should be noted that the TMMOB administration has not yet announced any disciplinary proceedings for engineers who drew the projects of the collapsed buildings after the earthquakes or carried out inspections in municipalities or private companies. However, it is well known that certain engineers rent their diplomas to contractors and inspection companies just to sign projects and documents and get paid for it, and who do not even know where the construction sites are.

In the aftermath of the 1999 Marmara Earthquake, which officially killed over 17,000, prosecutors did not open a large-scale investigation and did not bring those responsible for the collapsed buildings and mass death to justice. However, Veli Göçer, a contractor who was building in Yalova at the time and whose entire housing estate collapsed, was arrested and tried for the deaths of 198 people. Although Göçer was sentenced to 18 years and 9 months in prison, he was released after serving 7.5 years.

Today, the Erdoğan government is following the same script, trying to exonerate itself and the capitalist system by targeting a contractor of a collapsed building complex. In an event where over 36,000 people died according to official figures, the government takes no responsibility. Not a single official has resigned.

Despite the massive destruction and loss of life in the earthquake area, no high-level officials have been arrested, except for a few contractors and a few people who signed building permits at a lower level. A few token arrests cannot remove the responsibility of those who did not take safety precautions against earthquakes, those who prepared construction amnesties, those who approved them in parliament or did not oppose them, those who drew, licensed and inspected these projects.

Those who are responsible for social murder must be arrested and tried, above all those at the top of the political establishment and private industry. Holding those responsible to account and preventing further social catastrophes will require a broad political mobilization of the working class, armed with a socialist program against capitalism’s placing of private profit and wealth above human life.



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