

Turkish worker in Germany helped coordinate rescue and relief

Our reporter
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More than 2.7 million people of Turkish origin live in Germany. Most of them still have family and friends there, including in the region in south-western Turkey and north-western Syria devastated by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake on February 6.

More than 20 years ago, Hakan came to Germany from his hometown of Antakya, which is in Hatay province at the epicentre of the earthquake zone. In ancient Rome, the city was known as Antioch, and was the third largest city in the world after Rome and Alexandria. Today, “at least 80 percent of the city no longer exists,” Hakan reports. “It’s a disaster. There were 400,000 people living there.”

How many have died in Antakya is unclear, as it is across the entire earthquake zone. Hakan has great fears, “We can only guess how many more people will be recovered dead. The number will increase dramatically.”

Like everyone from the region, Hakan’s family has been badly affected. He describes what he and his relatives had to go through in the first days after the earthquake. “On the morning of February 6, when my phone’s alarm clock rang at 6 a.m., as it does every weekday, when I looked at it, I realized I had received dozens of messages from my acquaintances,” he recounts.

“At that point, I understood that there was an earthquake in Antakya. I immediately called my mother, who lives in Antakya, but couldn’t reach her. Then I called my siblings, cousins and finally all my acquaintances in Antakya. However, in the morning hours, I could not reach anyone there.”

Worried, he went to work and kept looking at his phone. “Around 12 p.m., I heard on the news that there had been a second earthquake. Then at 3 p.m. I received a text message from my brother. The message just said, ‘We’re fine.’ I thought of quickly buying a plane ticket and flying to Antakya, but at the travel agency they told me that Hatay airport was destroyed and there were no flights there.”

“On the news, the government agencies announced that Antakya could not be reached by land because the roads had been destroyed. At noon on February 7, I was able to have a one-minute phone conversation with my brother, who told me that their situation was dire, that they had not yet received any help, and that people were screaming in the rubble.”

“Those who managed to save themselves ran quickly out of the collapsed houses in their pajamas, barefoot or in socks. They had nothing, not even water. They were freezing and starving. As almost all the buildings collapsed, life came to a halt, electricity, natural gas, and water were cut off. The telephone network was cut off. The city was cut off from the outside world.”

“My mother told me the day after the quake that my brother was sleeping in the car with his wife and two children, that they had no clothes, no water, no food, that the weather was unusually cold—and then the line went dead.”

He said his relatives in the earthquake zone rarely had cell phone reception. “That’s why we hardly sleep. Whenever they have reception down there, they text briefly and then we make quick phone calls. Because it’s usually only one or two hours of reception, then you don’t hear from them again for hours.” Like his family, he has hardly slept since the earthquake.

Hakan, his wife Mihriban and his brothers in Germany have been active almost constantly since the earthquake arranging help and support. They are collecting money to support their family and friends. From Germany, they are on the phone almost non-stop with friends and relatives in Turkey outside the earthquake zone, organizing help.

Hakan said that they had rented a minibus in Uşak, 900 kilometres away, had it filled with blankets, water and biscuits and sent it to Antakya. “We didn’t know where my brother was,” Hakan says, “but because of the long distance between Uşak and Antakya, we didn’t want to

waste any time. Even if we couldn't reach my brother, we wanted to deliver the relief supplies we had collected for the earthquake victims."

Due to the onset of snowfall, the roads between Uşak and Antakya were only passable very slowly, he said, which meant the minibus took 24 hours to cover the 900 kilometres.

"At that point, I received a message from my brother that just contained a location," Hakan continued. "I sent the location to the driver of the minibus on the outskirts of Antakya. After that, I lost contact with the driver. About three hours later, however, he called me and put my brother on the phone."

With relief, Hakan reported, "My mother, my brother and his family had left the earthquake zone." He pointed out that the relief vehicle they had sent 900 kilometres away "had reached the region before the state."

Hakan knows too well that the rescue of the survivors was mainly due to the initiative of volunteers. Even before government aid arrived, volunteers had travelled to the region and attempted to rescue people from the rubble.

Hakan has also tried to reach his aunts and cousins. "My brother told me that the buildings where our relatives lived had collapsed. However, the volunteers did not have enough equipment." Hakan persistently called government agencies. "I told them that my relatives might still be alive under the rubble. I tried to give them the addresses of my relatives. But the authorities just hung up on me."

He then pulled out all the stops to help his relatives. "I asked the Socialist Equality Group (Sosyalist Eşitlik Grubu) in Turkey for help. In coordination with them, we informed volunteer rescue teams via Twitter about the collapsed buildings where people might still be living. At our urging, the teams went to the rubble where my aunt lived and pulled 26 people alive from the rubble, including my aunt."

He went on to describe how they continued to save lives. "Together with our friends from the Socialist Equality Group, we told the volunteer and government rescue teams where the building debris should be probed. Because of the very weak cell network in the region, we established coordination between people waiting for help for their loved ones and the rescue teams."

"We identified the regions where tents, blankets, water and food were needed and directed the vehicles coming from different cities to distribute relief supplies to those regions. When they returned, we made sure the vehicles took families, especially those with children and elderly

relatives in need of care, to the regions outside the earthquake."

Through their acquaintances, they organized shelters for earthquake victims outside the city.

"I guess we were able to get about 150 people out of the earthquake area this way," he reports. His mother and other relatives are now safe. "For a long time, we didn't know where my aunt was," he said. They have now found her through pictures shared on social media. "A doctor called me and said she was in the hospital." She was doing well, considering the circumstances, he said.

"The state did not arrive in Antakya until three days later, and then with a limited number of rescue teams" Hakan summed up bitterly. "If the state had started the rescue work in time, the death toll would have been much lower than it is now. The state brought about the deaths of thousands of people not only by not planning cities with the earthquake in mind before the earthquake, but also by intervening too late in the region after the earthquake."

The result of this government policy is a disaster for the victims of the earthquake. "When my five-year-old niece talks about the earthquake and the aftermath, it's hard to bear," he explained. "I have lost so many friends, from school, childhood and adolescence, acquaintances and relatives. Aunts, cousins, many are dead," Hakan reports with a heavy heart. "In Antakya, the city where I grew up, the number of my acquaintances who lost their lives is now much higher than the survivors."



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