

Death toll tops 45,000 in Turkish-Syrian earthquake

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Twelve days after two massive earthquakes in Kahramanmara? struck southern Turkey and northern Syria, the death toll continues to rise. The quakes, measuring 7.7 and 7.6 magnitudes, devastated ten provinces in Turkey, bringing the death toll in the country to 39,672 as of yesterday, according to official figures.

Syria, already devastated by the war for regime change waged since 2011 by the NATO powers, including Turkey, and the crippling sanctions imposed by the imperialist powers, was also severely hit by the quakes. Nearly 6,000 people lost their lives in the country, where the UN estimates that over 5 million people have been left homeless.

Moreover, over 1 million Syrians who fled the war and sought refuge in Turkey were living in the border provinces where the earthquake struck. While no official announcement has been made on the number of Syrian refugees who lost their lives in the earthquake, Taha El Gazi, spokesperson for the Asylum Seekers Rights Platform, claimed that the number was over 6,000.

According to the latest statement by Murat Kurum, Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change in Turkey, 684,000 buildings in the earthquake zone were inspected and over 84,000 buildings were identified as “collapsed, to be demolished immediately or heavily damaged.” This means that 12 percent of these buildings have collapsed or been heavily damaged, a proportion that rises much higher in some places.

Vice President Fuat Oktay said yesterday that the number of sites with continuing search-and-rescue operations is below 200. The state started search-and-rescue operations in the affected area days after the earthquakes, leading to the deaths of many injured people waiting to be rescued under the rubble. Soon after the official response began, and with many people still under the rubble, debris removal operations were launched in many cities.

While no official announcement has been made as to how many people might still be under the rubble, alive or dead, it is widely feared that many people may die during debris removal work carried out with heavy construction

equipment.

The rescue of Neslihan K?l?ç from under the rubble in Mara? on Thursday after a construction equipment operator noticed her during the debris removal work underscored this danger. This premature debris removal work is, in fact, a continuation of the bankrupt, politically criminal policy of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government—both in failing to prepare for the quakes and failing to intervene afterwards to save lives.

The government, which only started to intervene in the affected region on the third day of the earthquake, focused more on covering up its obvious responsibility for the disaster than on search-and-rescue and relief efforts. While no official has resigned, 83 people, mostly contractors, have so far been arrested as scapegoats.

Erdo?an, whose government made no preparations for an earthquake that scientists and state-affiliated institutions had been warning about for years, blamed the resulting social disaster on “fate,” arguing that it is impossible to prepare for massive earthquakes.

However, among many other reports, the “Kahramanmara? Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Plan” published in 2020 by the Governorship of Kahramanmara? and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) under the Interior Ministry has revealed that the earthquake and destruction that occurred in February 6, 2023 were largely predicted.

“In the event of a major earthquake, it is foreseen that a large part of the city would be affected,” the report said in the scenario of a 7.5 magnitude earthquake in Kahramanmara?. It listed the following possible causes of destruction: “The region is close to an active fault zone; the building stock is poor; soil conditions are suitable for liquefaction; and the ground water level is very high.”

It warned: “Kahramanmara? region and its surroundings are located in the first degree earthquake zone with high seismic activity in terms of its tectonic structure. The region is under the influence of the East Anatolian Fault and the Dead Sea Fault, which are still active. It is understood that

there is an energy accumulation of 200 years on these faults and there is a seismically high potential hazard. At the same time, the fact that the segments of the faults that have not yet been dislocated are located near Kahramanmara? increases the degree of risk in this section.”

The report continued:

The fact that the Eastern Anatolian Fault and the Dead Sea Fault meet just south of Kahramanmara? and twist into branches may constitute the epicenter area of possible large magnitude earthquakes. This raises concerns that it will increase the risk and the degree of damage. In addition, the fact that most of the settlements are located on very weak soils further strengthens this concern.

Emphasizing that the public was unaware of the danger of a possible earthquake and that this further increased the extent of the danger, the report outlined the measures the government should take:

For this reason, in order to minimize the loss of life and property in a possible earthquake, it is essential to carry out detailed ground surveys in residential areas and evacuate buildings in hazardous zones. In addition, earthquake activity and earthquake risk must be taken into consideration in the selection of the establishment and development locations of new villages, towns and cities. Earthquake-resistant buildings with correct reinforced concrete and static calculations should be constructed on solid ground away from active faults.

However, those living in hazardous zones were not evacuated, nor was public safety ensured by constructing earthquake-resistant buildings on solid ground. Tens of thousands of people lost their lives as a result, under conditions where the public was largely unaware of the danger. In Turkey, where the state-sponsored private construction industry prided itself on huge investments and reaped huge profits, such a long-term investment, requiring extensive state support, was not seen as profitable.

As millions in the earthquake area were unable to meet their basic needs and thousands were still under the rubble, the Erdoğan government focused on emphasizing “national unity and solidarity” to hide the capitalist profit interests and irresponsible policies behind the disaster.

Initially, while the state and the billionaires stood by and watched the disaster unfold, miners, construction workers, firefighters, health workers, and other layers of workers and youth flocked to the region to join in search-and-rescue and relief efforts. This effort saved many lives and provided for the basic needs of thousands of people. However, the ruling class saw the focus on this effort as unacceptable, as it exposed the state’s undeniable responsibility for the disaster and its criminal incapacity.

On Wednesday, the government issued a live-stream “Turkey in Full Unity” event to collect donations for earthquake victims. The program was hosted by celebrities and broadcast live on many TV channels. It essentially turned into a promotion of the financial oligarchy that owes its fortunes to the exploitation and impoverishment of the working class.

In reality, 85 billion of the 115 billion Turkish liras (US\$6.1 billion) said to have been collected for the AFAD state disaster agency in the “Turkey in Full Unity” event came from public banks, not from private sources.

The main official and private institutions of Turkish capitalism, which puts private profit and the accumulation of wealth ahead of human life, tried to whitewash this corrupt social system by throwing millions of dollars around. Some of them were the construction giants wringing their hands to get tenders for the new building projects that the government announced would be completed within a year in the area that turned into mass graves.

What Friedrich Engels wrote in 1845 in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* about the disgusting hypocrisy of the English bourgeoisie of the time is as if written for today’s Turkish ruling elite’s response to this preventable social catastrophe:

As though you rendered the proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practising your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!



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