Turkish official says earthquake death toll could reach 150,000 as aftershocks shake region

Ula? Ate?çi
20 February 2023

Two aftershocks of magnitude 6.4 and 5.8 killed at least three people and injured over 200 in Hatay on the Turkish-Syrian border yesterday. The main cause of casualties in these aftershocks, which followed two major earthquakes two weeks ago, is thought to be the shortage of tents and containers being used as emergency housing for quake victims. This led some to enter their apartments, which were thought to have "minor" or "moderate" damage.

Meanwhile, a statement has emerged confirming suspicions that the death toll is far higher than official figures given after the February 6 quakes. In a speech that surfaced on social media and was reportedly delivered on Monday, February 13, ??rnak Governor Osman Bilgin, who was appointed "coordinator" for the earthquake-hit Nurda?? district of Gaziantep province, said the real death toll could be five times worse. As of February 13, the day of his speech, the official death toll in Turkey was around 31,000.

Addressing quake victims in Nurda??, Bilgin admitted that the state had intervened too late, saying; "I'm sorry, maybe we came late, but the situation is much worse than what you saw and knew. Maybe 3–4, maybe 5 times worse than the announced figures."

He added, "We are completely demolishing Nurda?? district, we took this decision yesterday with the environment minister. We are demolishing all of it. I'm telling you this so that you can understand the disaster… There is an apartment building where 150 people died. Of course, this [disaster] was the will of God. But we must fulfill our responsibility as human beings."

The "responsibility" of the state was to take precautions against the earthquake danger that scientists and state institutions had warned about for years in official reports. Settlements on the fault line and buildings known to be unsafe during major earthquakes should have been evacuated. Instead of taking these steps, which would have eaten into corporate profits, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government abandoned the people of the region to their fate.

As of yesterday, the official death toll in Turkey exceeded 41,000, while in hard-hit Syria it has remained unchanged at 5,800 for 10 days. As Syria has already been devastated by NATO's war for regime change and crippling imperialist sanctions since 2011, this number, tragically, is also likely to be a serious underestimate.

Such estimates clearly suggest that the preventable social catastrophe of the Turkey-Syria earthquake disaster is far more horrific than previously thought. This would imply a loss of life on the scale of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2004, which caused around 228,000 deaths, and the Haiti earthquake in 2010, which caused an estimated 316,000 deaths—that is, the largest natural disasters in the 21st century.

The Turkish Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change announced that 927,000 buildings in the affected area had been inspected as of yesterday, of which about 118,000 had collapsed or been heavily damaged. Last week, Erdo?an said 2.2 million quake victims had fled the region. It is thought that this number may now exceed 4 million.

Erdo?an said, "those who will take shelter outside the container cities will receive a monthly rent subsidy of 5,000 liras for homeowners and 2,000 liras for renters." While this distinction between renters and homeowners has caused social anger, it is not possible to find an apartment for rent for 2,000 liras in Turkey.

In Syria, the UN estimates that over 5 million people are homeless after the earthquakes. Little international aid has reached the country, abandoned and blockaded by the imperialist powers. The ongoing occupation of northern

© World Socialist Web Site

Syria by US and Turkish troops as well as Islamist jihadist forces has prevented a centralized earthquake response by the Syrian government.

In another demonstration of imperialist hypocrisy, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Turkey on Sunday, announcing an additional $100 million in earthquake aid to Turkey and Syria. It is unknown how much of the total $185 million in US "aid" will go to Syria and reach the earthquake victims. However, this sum pales in comparison to the billions of dollars NATO has spent on weapons to destroy Syria and now to wage war in Ukraine.

Moreover, on Sunday Israel bombed civilian areas in the Syrian capital, Damascus, killing at least five and wounding 15. "The strike on Sunday is the deadliest Israeli attack in the Syrian capital," said Rami Abdel Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. *Al Jazeera* reported that the airstrike "hit a densely populated district close to Omayyad Square."

Last month, Israel struck Damascus International Airport, killing four.

While there have been few reports on the plight of the millions of earthquake victims in Syria, two weeks after the quake, the situation in the affected area in Turkey remains dire. While the Erdo?an government boasts of the aid it has collected and provided, pictures show masses of people sleeping outside at night in the cold.

According to the daily *Evrensel*, there is still no state response or aid in the earthquake-hit Ye?ilyurt district of Malatya. A quake survivor there said: "It has been 14 days since the earthquake, but the state does not see this district. From digging the rubble to everything else, we did everything here with our own means. There are no toilets; we have been using empty fields for days. We haven't showered for 13 days, and we are covered in dirt and filth. There is no state here."

An elderly woman said, "For days, aid has only come from the people. We haven't seen anyone from the state. Hot food doesn't come anyway. We only get soup once a day. We don't know what to do, we don't have a house, and we don't know where to stay."

There are serious problems, especially the risk of epidemics in tent cities set up by Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). Speaking to *Evrensel* on Sunday from Pazarc?k district of Mara?, health workers' union (SES) executive Prof. Dr. Sibel Perçinel said, "The need for toilets and bathrooms cannot be met. The AFAD team does not pay enough attention to the earthquake victims. We saw a patient whose legs were infected with gangrene and amputation was not carried out."

She also pointed to the horrific situation facing Syrian refugees in Turkey: "The situation of Syrian families is even more difficult here. They live in larger numbers and have communication problems. Volunteers can provide more preventive health services here. If hygiene conditions are not improved as soon as possible, outbreaks that may occur will make the work even more difficult."

While it describes the two massive 7.8 and 7.6 earthquakes within nine hours on February 6 as "the disaster of the century," the Erdo?an government continues to deny its responsibility for this preventable social catastrophe. So far 133 people, mostly contractors, have been arrested, and no senior officials have resigned.

However, lawyer Hüseyin Cim?it from Samsun Bar Association filed a criminal complaint against President Erdo?an; Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Murat Kurum; Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu; Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar; Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca; and Minister of Transport and Infrastructure Adil Karaismailo?lu.

The criminal complaint reportedly covers mayors, municipal council members, project officers and managers of GSM operators who served between 1999 and 2023 in the provinces which the earthquake devastated.

The complaint, which demands prosecution of these individuals, includes accusations such as "causing the deaths of over 36,000 people as a result of neglect and abuse of duty," "paving the way for the collapse of thousands of buildings" and "putting the country's economy in a bottleneck."

It is only however through an independent political mobilization of the working class that the main perpetrators of this colossal social crime, both in the political establishment and in the private sector, will be brought to trial.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site