

Turkey, hit by earthquake, conceals mass COVID-19 pandemic deaths

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24 February 2023

On Thursday, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) released mortality statistics for 2020 and 2021. Compared to the years before the pandemic, there were 72,000 excess deaths in 2020, when the pandemic started, and 130,000 more in 2021. Thus, by the end of 2021, there had been around 200,000 COVID-related deaths.

However, the Turkish Health Ministry had claimed that the number of deaths from COVID-19 was 82,000 by the end of 2021. TurkStat has not yet released data on deaths in 2022. According to the last official data released on November 27, 2022, the death toll in Turkey since the beginning of the pandemic was claimed to be 101,492.

However, the number of excess deaths had reached 319,000 as of December 27, 2022, according to the calculations of Güçlü Yaman, a member of the Pandemic Working Group of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB).

TurkStat has tried to avoid public attention by releasing the reports, which it had previously postponed without justification, amid the Turkey-Syria earthquake disaster. In his tweet on the issue, Yaman stated: “In the midst of a disaster in which tens of thousands of people have died and the real numbers are again in doubt, they are releasing death statistics they haven’t released for three years.”

He added, “It doesn’t matter to them how many of us died in which disaster. The important thing for them is that they find a time of chaos to release the numbers.”

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government and the entire political establishment have caused the deaths of over 43,000 people by failing to prepare for the expected earthquake and responding too late.

However, as with the concealment of the real number of pandemic-related deaths, it is suspected that the

death toll from the earthquake is being massively downplayed. Osman Bilgin, the governor of ?rnak, who was in charge of a district in the earthquake-hit area, admitted that the real death toll in Turkey alone could be over 150,000.

A report by the Association of Public Health Specialists (HASUDER) on Hatay, which was hit hardest by the earthquake, states: “According to interviews with local administrators and some academics, it is estimated that at least 60,000 people died under the rubble in Hatay alone.”

Since the earthquake disaster, the Erdoğan government has focused more on covering up its responsibility for the social catastrophe than on rescuing and helping earthquake victims. It even blocked access to Twitter, which was used by volunteers in search and rescue efforts to locate those under the rubble.

Critical airports and highways, which should not have been built on fault lines and should be resistant to major earthquakes, were badly damaged. However, for a long time, all state forces, military and civilian, were not mobilized and there were serious problems in coordinating the response.

The report has confirmed that the extremely late start of search and rescue efforts led to the deaths of many people: “The common view expressed by everyone who lived through the earthquake in Hatay was that search and rescue operations were not systematically initiated in the first 48 hours.” And this limited “the number of citizens who could be rescued alive from the rubble.”

It was a product of the indifference of the entire ruling class towards public health and safety. Eight deputies of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), which had a “construction amnesty” section in its

election program, voted “yes” to measures brought to parliament by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) before the June 2018 elections. These measures sought to legalize illegal buildings that violated regulations on earthquake and other disaster risks.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Erdoğan government adopted a policy of “profits before lives.” It focused on concealing, not preventing, infections and deaths from the pandemic. This policy, implemented all over the world, reached its climax last year with the claim that “the pandemic is over.” In fact, infections and deaths from COVID-19 continue in Turkey and around the world.

This response to the pandemic has also been adopted by all factions of the ruling class, including the bourgeois opposition, the media and the union bureaucracy.

However, just as science-guided preparation for an earthquake would have prevented this massive destruction and loss of life, public health measures against the pandemic could have prevented the deaths of about 320,000 people in Turkey and more than 22 million worldwide.

Moreover, the masses, abandoned to their fate before and after the earthquake, are still deprived of basic needs such as shelter and sanitation 18 days after the earthquake.

In a February 16 report, the Turkish Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases warned that “the current living conditions in the earthquake-hit region greatly increase the risk of infectious diseases, so measures to prevent these diseases must be taken quickly.” However, serious sanitation problems still persist in many places.

HASUDER has reported that “There is a general shortage of toilets in Hatay. The number of toilets is very low and some of the toilets are haphazardly placed on the ground with no connection to water or cesspools.” It added “There are not enough toilets and some of the toilets that have been opened for use do not meet the appropriate conditions. This threatens public health.”

Reporting that scabies is seen in children, it warned that crowded living conditions increase the risk of COVID-19 and influenza.

Moreover, there is still a serious shortage of tents in the region. “Citizens have turned existing greenhouse

tents into living spaces with their own means. Mostly children and women sleep in these tents. These areas do not effectively protect people from the cold and pose health risks in many respects, such as the possible presence of pesticides. These risks are even greater for children.”

The report stated that only one of the 12 water wells could be utilized, and mountains of garbage have piled up. While the field hospital could only be opened a week after the earthquake, many of the wounded who were rescued from the rubble died “because they could not be transported to a full-fledged hospital in time.”

It warned about post-earthquake reconstruction: “The danger that awaits us now is to build similar buildings to the old areas with the old understanding and to move towards new disasters ... With a new understanding with the participation of the society, it is necessary to move towards the goal of healthy and sustainable cities with earth-friendly, earthquake-resistant solid buildings. Citizens have the right to safe buildings where they can live and work safely.”

Both in Turkey and around the world, social resources are available to take scientific measures to prevent the deadly consequences of earthquakes or pandemics. For this, the working class must bring an end to the policy of “profit before lives” and its source, capitalism, and build a global society based on social needs, i.e., socialism.



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