

Turkish Red Crescent's sale of tents after the earthquake revealed as "government resign" chants rise from stadiums

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26 February 2023

Three weeks after two devastating earthquakes caused massive destruction and mass deaths in Turkey and Syria, public anger and opposition to President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's response is growing. Over the weekend, it emerged that the Turkish Red Crescent sold tents that should have been provided immediately and free of charge to earthquake victims after the quake. Thousands chanted "Government resign" at major soccer matches in Istanbul.

Over 100 members and supporters of the Workers' Party of Turkey (T?P) who wanted to protest the sale of tents by the Red Crescent in Istanbul last night were attacked by police and detained. Others, who tried to hold a protest titled, "They were killed not by the earthquake, but by your rent-seeking system," called by "Labor, Peace and Democracy Forces" in Kad?köy, were detained.

After a break in the soccer league games due to the earthquake, fans at Saturday's match between Fenerbahçe and Konyaspor chanted "20 years with lies. [Government] Resign!" In the Be?ikta?-Antalyaspor match played last night, "Government resign" chants rose from the stands.

Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the fascistic ally of the Erdo?an government, called for the matches to be played without spectators in response to these protests, which reflect the widespread anger among the population.

The earthquake directly affected over 25 million people in Turkey and Syria, killing more than 51,000 people—at least 44,374 in Turkey and 6,760 in Syria. One governor's estimate, which has not been officially denied, puts the real death toll as high as 150,000. Millions of people in both countries have been left homeless and thousands are still without basic needs such as shelter and sanitation.

The daily *Cumhuriyet*'s columnist Murat A??rel revealed on Saturday that the Turkish Red Crescent had sold tents worth 46 million TL to the charity organization "Ahbap" on the third day of the earthquake. The Red Crescent's mission is stated on its website as follows: "as an international

charitable organization, it provides services and activities in war and peace, in accordance with its purpose and according to the understanding of volunteerism, without receiving any compensation from the beneficiaries and without expecting anything in return."

The Turkish Red Crescent, though not affiliated to the state on paper, is under tight government control. This was particularly evident in its aid to Islamist jihadist forces backed by Ankara in NATO's war for regime change in Syria since 2011.

A??rel wrote in his article: "It was revealed that the Red Crescent, which could not be found in the region after the earthquake that killed tens of thousands of citizens, was busy selling its tent stocks while thousands of people were dying under the rubble."

He said the Red Crescent has tent and container production facilities. "It sold tents worth 46 million TL to AHBAP on the third day of the earthquake. It was also alleged that it diverted its stocks and the aid to be sent to congregations, sectarian foundations and associations," he wrote.

A??rel reported that he asked the Red Crescent about these allegations and received the following response:

In the aftermath of major disasters, State of the Republic of Turkey developed the Disaster Response Plan (TAMP) with the contributions of respected scientists in the field. According to this mandatory plan, the Red Crescent is the main responsible organization for nutrition and blood supply services. It is also a support organization in other areas such as shelter, humanitarian aid and health care.

Ahbap Association also decided to support the need for shelter in the [affected] region with the resources provided by its donors, and at this point, it dispatched the tent capacity provided by the Red Crescent to the points indicated by AFAD [official

response organization]. The Red Crescent evaluated this process in terms of solving the shelter needs of the disaster victims as soon as possible. In order to ensure the continuation of tent production, it accepted the raw material cost [from Ahbap Association].

Last week, Erdoğan reacted harshly to widespread criticisms of the Red Crescent's inadequate or non-existent aid to the earthquake zone. Defending the Red Crescent, he exploded, "They ask that where the Red Crescent is. You immoral, you dishonorable, you despicable! Is such a lack of conscience possible? This Red Crescent delivers food to 2.5 million people a day. In a country, it's intolerable to blacken one's own institution and organization in such an immoral way."

In reality, state institutions or government-controlled organizations such as the Red Crescent did not provide earthquake victims with enough tents. This forced many to enter their homes, which were reported as having minor or moderate damage, amid cold weather. As a result, at least six people were killed and nearly 300 injured in the February 20 aftershock in Hatay.

The journalist Arel also reported that Red Crescent sold tents not only to the Ahbap Association but also to the Turkish Pharmacists Union: "There is the Turkish Pharmacists Union (TEB). On the first day of the earthquake, they were looking for tents and containers to distribute free medicine. They called the Red Crescent. They sell one tent for 160,000 liras (US\$8,500). But there are no tents for citizens. If they could pay for them, maybe they would be available for citizens."

The Ahbap Association confirmed that they had received tents from the Red Crescent, stating, "We had a meeting with Red Crescent's tent corporation. We learned that they had 2,050 tents and we immediately made the contract and sent 2,050 tents to the affected area the next morning."

Musician Haluk Levent, the founder and leader of the association, wrote on Twitter, "We didn't have the luxury of 'should we or shouldn't we buy these tents' when everyone was freezing for their lives that evening. Every action we took was legal and correct."

Kerem Korkmaz, the chair of the Red Crescent, defended its decision to hold the tents and sell them on the third day of the earthquake instead of sending them to the affected region. He said, "The Red Crescent's tent corporation has allocated the funds received from the Ahbap association for the supply of raw materials for tents and planned the tents to be produced for the use of earthquake victims free of charge through Kızılay."

He added that "The cooperation of Ahbap and Kızılay is moral, rational and legal. Anyone who claims otherwise either does not understand the issue or has bad intentions."

The tent scandal also exposed the fact that the Red Crescent sells blood donations it receives free of charge from volunteers. "Do you also sell our blood?" was asked on social media, with one doctor answering as follows: "I have managed blood banks in various hospitals for years. Yes, the Red Crescent sells the blood of volunteers."

What has been exposed in the tent scandal is the rottenness of the capitalist system, from the government to the aid organizations it controls. The fact that the basic needs of earthquake victims, such as shelter, are not met, and that a state-backed organization responsible for providing them even sells the tents needed, reveals the general indifference of the ruling class towards public health and safety.

The Erdoğan government not only failed to take any precautions against the expected earthquakes despite long-standing scientific warnings, but also failed in both shelter and search-and-rescue efforts after the earthquake. The state failed to mobilize its massive resources in a timely manner, and the official search and rescue operations only started on the third day of the earthquake. This spelled death for thousands of people under the rubble who could have been saved.

The necessary lessons must be drawn from this preventable social disaster. Today the social resources exist to build earthquake-resistant buildings and cities and to meet the basic needs of the population all over the world. For these to genuinely be used to protect public health and safety, these resources and political power must be transferred from finance capital to the working class.



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