

The earthquake disaster in Turkey and Syria and the role of German imperialism

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In an earlier comment, the *World Socialist Web Site* described the major earthquake disaster that shook large areas of southern Turkey and northern Syria in early February as “a devastating indictment of world capitalism.” While governments worldwide expend enormous resources on rearmament and war, they are neglecting the most urgent needs of the broad masses of the population. The victims of the earthquake are being given only paltry handouts.

German imperialism is playing a particularly vile role in this regard. To date, the German government has pledged just 108 million euros to support those in the affected region. Compare this sum to the 100 billion euros made available virtually overnight to finance the biggest military rearmament in Germany since Hitler, announced a year ago by Chancellor Scholz (SPD) in his infamous “new foreign policy era” speech. The sum allocated for extra spending on the German army is almost a thousand times more than the money allotted for the earthquake victims in Turkey and Syria!

Almost a fortnight ago, both Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Green Party) and Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) travelled to the earthquake region to feign sympathy for the victims.

“Our sympathy is not exhausted in words,” declared Baerbock, adding that such sympathy would not abate even if the catastrophe and its consequences were replaced by other headlines in the news.

Her colleague Faeser laid it on even thicker: “It tears our hearts to see the inconceivable devastation and endless suffering this earthquake has caused in Turkey and Syria.” It was very important for the German government to provide immediate and comprehensive assistance in close coordination with the Turkish authorities, the Interior Minister said.

Who are Baerbock and Faeser trying to kid with their crocodile tears? The German government is coldly abandoning the people in Turkey and Syria to their fate. The special funding provided by the government to escalate NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine would be sufficient

to repair the worst of the earthquake damage and also provide considerable reconstruction aid.

According to the World Bank, the material damage caused by the earthquake, which caused countless people to lose all their belongings, amounts to at least 34.2 billion US dollars (about 32.4 billion euros) for Turkey. For Syria, the property damage is estimated at around 5.1 billion US dollars (around 4.8 billion euros), although this figure is provisional. The reconstruction costs for both countries are estimated to be about double that sum. Although severe aftershocks may still increase the property damage (and also the human suffering), even then the 100 billion euros would probably not be exhausted.

The sum pledged so far by the German government to earthquake victims is merely a drop in the ocean, at the same time the ruling class in Germany is demanding even more for rearmament. More and more heavy weapons are being delivered to Kiev for the NATO war against Russia, as Scholz revealed in his government statement on the anniversary of his “new era” speech.

Far more serious than the material damage is the human tragedy of the disaster: According to current estimates, 53,000 people have died so far. In Turkey, 45,089 deaths have been confirmed and 8,476 in Syria. More victims are being added every day, and the number of unreported cases is likely to be far higher than the official figures for both countries. Meanwhile, an entire region suffers from homelessness, hunger and adverse climate conditions. Many have to hold out in emergency shelters or even in tents.

Many people in Germany want to help their relatives in the affected region in Turkey, but the German Foreign Office’s supposedly “simplified, pragmatic visa procedure” reads like a bad joke. In cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, this procedure is supposed to enable relatives from the disaster area to travel to Germany quickly.

The list of required documents, which according to the Foreign Ministry have been reduced “to a minimum,” is utterly cynical in view of the situation on the ground. In order to go through the procedure successfully, earthquake

victims are expected to submit the following documents:

- Official application form
- Valid Turkish passport
- Health insurance for the Schengen area
- Biometric passport photo
 - Letter of commitment from a first or second degree relative
- Copy of the identity card/passport and, if applicable, the residence permit of the inviting person
 - Proof of residence (which must have been in the earthquake area at the time of the disaster)
- Proof of relationship
- Written description of the emergency situation
- Signatures/notarised consent of parents in the case of minors

The Foreign Office's requirements are not only an extra affront for traumatised people from the Turkish earthquake region trying to save their lives; the actual and bureaucratic hurdles simply make it impossible to fulfill the requirements of the visa process.

A special arrangement for those who have lost their travel documents in the rubble of their former homes—which is likely in the vast majority of cases—has been ruled out by the Foreign Office. In such cases, those affected must rely on the (unlikely) cooperation of the Turkish authorities.

In addition, the declaration of commitment of the relatives in Germany must be sent as a copy to an existing address to the applicant in Turkey—a completely hopeless undertaking in view of the destruction on the ground. The same applies to the copy of the inviting person's identity document.

In the meantime, families in Germany have set off by car to the dangerous earthquake region to bring their relatives the required documents in person. The route from Berlin to the completely destroyed city of Gaziantep in Turkey is no less than 3,635 km.

Moreover, many families of Turkish origin in Germany do not know whether and for how long they will be able to bear the financial burden (currently up to 500 euros per person per month) that comes with the declaration of commitment. The scurrilous demand to describe the personal plight of the applicant in writing shows the utter indifference with which the German ruling class regards the earthquake region.

About 20 million people in Turkey have been affected by the earthquake, according to the German Foreign Office, but only 1,097 three-month visas have been issued so far under the “simplified” procedure for Turkish citizens. Just 159 persons, about half of them from Syria, have received a visa for the purpose of family reunification.

Earthquake victims in Syria are excluded from the ostensibly “simplified” visa procedure. They have been allowed their own ostensibly simplified procedure for

permanent residence in Germany, but in fact the hurdles are even higher than for those trying to migrate from Turkey.

Those who want to take advantage of the visa procedure must, in addition to having the financial means to travel to Lebanon, Jordan or Istanbul, embark on a journey that was already almost impossible before the earthquakes. (The German embassy in Damascus remains closed.) Only in exceptional cases is it even possible to cross the Syrian-Turkish border.

The German ruling class bears a massive share of responsibility for the fact that Syria has been plunged into an even deeper social catastrophe by the earthquakes and that necessary aid has failed to arrive. Since 2011, it has supported the war for regime change in Syria, a war which has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands and forced millions to flee with large parts of the country destroyed.

At that time, the then German government led by Angela Merkel supported EU sanctions against Syria, which have been extended every year since. According to the aid organisation Malteser International, these sanctions make it even more difficult to deliver aid today to the earthquake zone.

The German Foreign Office boasted at the beginning of February that the sanctions took into account the need to avoid “negative consequences of any kind for the civilian population.” This is a blatant lie. As a result of the sanctions, direct bank transfers, for example, which could be used to support relatives on the ground, are prohibited. Nor can any sort of medical care in hospitals be guaranteed because equipment, spare parts or medicines cannot be paid for by bank transfer.



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