

The Turkish-Syrian earthquake and the impending danger to Istanbul

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The official death toll of the two February 6 earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş, which devastated both Turkey and Syria, has now passed 58,000. There are 50,096 confirmed fatalities in Turkey and 8,476 in Syria. On March 20, Vice President Fuat Oktay announced that 6,807 of those who died in Turkey were foreign nationals. The vast majority of these were Syrians who fled to Turkey to escape the war in their country.

The impact of the Kahramanmaraş earthquake was enormous. After the first quake, nearly 14,000 aftershocks with magnitudes up to 6.7 occurred in the region. These earthquakes, centered in Kahramanmaraş, affected 13.5 million people in Turkey over an area of 1,000 square kilometers. They were felt as far away as Lebanon, Cyprus, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Iran and Egypt, sending people into the streets to escape the threat of collapsing buildings.

The devastation took on horrific proportions in 11 provinces in Turkey. Environment Minister Murat Kurum said that in cities affected by the quake, 279,000 buildings, with 821,302 independent sections, had collapsed or were moderately or heavily damaged or slated for demolition. In these regions, over 500,000 tents have been set up and more than 2 million people are still staying in tents. While over 40,000 people are trying to shelter in containers in the region, millions affected by the quake have had to leave the region to find shelter.

Moreover, there are still problems in the earthquake zone in terms of access to tents, containers and basic necessities such as water, food, showers and toilets.

Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, on the other hand, is addressing the people's housing problems in its campaigning for the May 14 elections as a servant of the profit interests of the ruling class.

After saying that they had started building 27,253 apartments in 11 provinces affected by the earthquakes

since February 21, Kurum said, "We are planning the construction of 15,000 village houses together with our General Directorate of Construction Works in March. Again, together with the TOKİ [Housing Development Administration], our General Directorate of Construction Works and Emlak Konut [Real Estate Investment Company], we will start the construction of 309,000 houses in the next 2 months."

The ministry is awarding housing construction tenders to construction companies close to the government without regard for basic scientific criteria.

Scientists are warning the government against starting construction of permanent housing while aftershocks continue in the earthquake zone. Without detailed ground surveys and a scientific study and urban planning, this simply creates conditions for new catastrophes.

Moreover, concerns among the public and scientists about the Marmara earthquake, which could occur at any moment according to scientific data in Turkey, continue to increase.

Scientific studies indicate that the Central Marmara Fault, which runs through the Sea of Marmara south of the metropolis of Istanbul, generates major earthquakes approximately every 250 years. The last major earthquake on this fault occurred in 1766. Moreover, since movements on the North Anatolian Fault in 1999, scientists have raised ever more urgent warnings that enormous stress has accumulated on the Central Marmara Fault.

Dr. Doğan Kalafat, Director of the National Earthquake Monitoring Center (UDİM) at Boğaziçi University's Kandilli Observatory and Earthquake Research Institute, stated that the probability that a magnitude-7 earthquake will hit Istanbul before 2030 is 64 percent. It has a 75 percent chance of occurring in the next 50 years. Kalafat added that "the probability of a major earthquake in Istanbul happening by 2090 is 95 percent."

The catastrophic damage and loss of life caused by the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş is a warning of what such a quake would do to Turkey's most populous and most industrially-developed region. In Istanbul (15,907,951), Kocaeli (2,079,072), Tekirdağ (1,142,451), Bursa (3,194,720), Balıkesir (1,257,590), Çanakkale (559,383) and Yalova (296,333), a total of 24,437,500 people would be affected by an earthquake centered under the Marmara Sea.

The provinces around the Marmara Sea contribute the most to Turkey's Gross National Product. Istanbul alone has a share of over 30 percent. The Marmara Region overall has the highest population density in Turkey. The results of an earthquake in such a region, whose building stock is not very different in terms of quality and resistance to earthquake damage from that in the Kahramanmaraş region, would be especially devastating.

On this issue, eyes turn to Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Republican People's Party's (CHP) mayor of Istanbul, with this question: "What has been done about Istanbul's earthquake preparedness?"

In an interview with journalist Uğur Dündar on TV100 last month, he spoke on preparations being made for an expected earthquake. When Dündar asked "Is Istanbul ready for an earthquake," he replied: "If we move at the past 20-year pace, we will need 100 years to solve Istanbul's problems."

İmamoğlu's remarks blaming his predecessor, the AKP municipal administrations for decades, made clear that the government's grossly inadequate policies have led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths in the affected region. However, what İmamoğlu has done on earthquake preparedness since his election in 2019 is also completely inadequate.

On March 1, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB) published its "mobilization plan" to turn Istanbul into an earthquake-resistant city. At the meeting, however, İmamoğlu delivered an opening speech whose content was almost a confession of having done nothing since he took office in 2019. After the Turkish-Syrian quakes, he announced, "the municipality's earthquake budget will be revised," in an admission that the previous levels of funding were inadequate.

His proposals included establishing an earthquake council, identifying and preparing temporary shelter, laying foundations for the construction of affordable social housing, and increasing rapid inspections of buildings. He did not say why he waited for four years to begin such policies.

There are, however, 1.17 million houses in Istanbul (255,000 built before 1980, 538,800 from 1980-2000, and 376,000 from 2000-2019). According to İBB rapid inspections, it is known that the concrete, iron and construction standards of houses built before 2000 cannot withstand a major earthquake. Thus, 793,800 houses need to be reinforced, or demolished and rebuilt.

The most difficult question raised by İmamoğlu's statements was about "non-profit building reinforcement." This is a proposal for state authorities to help private citizens finance the reinforcement of their own homes, by ensuring that construction companies do the work at cost and do not make any profit on the reinforcement operations. However, it leaves private citizens to foot the entire bill for the earthquake reinforcement of their own homes.

This sinister "Non-profit building reinforcement" scheme means the wealthy can reinforce their homes against earthquakes, while workers, who cannot afford to pay to rebuild their homes, are left to be wounded or killed if their houses collapse in the next earthquake.

Workers and the urban poor do not know how they will cover the next day's basic food expenditures, let alone pay to retrofit or renovate housing they live in. Taking out a loan for this would mean for most working people in Turkey being condemned to crippling debt for a lifetime.

While Kurum has raised the state credit limit for urban transformation from 600,000 TL to 1.250.000 TL, this is not comforting news for workers. Indeed, if a minimum wage worker devotes his entire wage to loan repayment, he would repay a loan of 1,250,000 TL in 147 months.

Finding the necessary resources to protect workers and the urban poor from earthquakes is a task that cannot be carried out within the confines of the capitalist market. It requires the mobilization of the working class in political struggle. Only the planned use of the vast social wealth and productive capacity created by world industry can build the earthquake-resistant housing that is critical to protect tens of millions of people in Turkey and internationally.



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