

Two months after earthquake disaster, Turkish government keeps ignoring public safety

Ozan Özgür
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More than two months have passed since the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes caused massive destruction and loss of life in Turkey and Syria. The debris removal and construction works implemented by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the earthquake region make clear that the unscientific, “profit before lives” policies that led to tens of thousands of casualties continue without interruption.

Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu said on April 5 that the death toll had risen to 50,399 in Turkey. In Syria, whose northern regions were severely affected by the earthquakes, at least 8,476 people lost their lives. However, it is thought that the actual death toll in both countries is far higher.

Although more than two months have passed since the disaster, serious problems persist in the affected area. Shelter is still the most important problem. At least 35,355 buildings collapsed in earthquakes that affected approximately 15 million people, or 18 percent of Turkey’s population.

Since the first day of the earthquake, approximately 2.5 million people have struggled to find shelter, while an estimated 5 million people or more migrated to different cities in Turkey.

Most of the earthquake victims are still living in tent cities which are not suitable for winter conditions. Some are trying to live in simple tents they built themselves. There are still only few container houses, which provide better protection against rain and cold, in the region. On March 20, according to an official statement, around 2 million people were staying in tents and 40,000 in containers.

Tent and container cities have been built in unsuitable areas lacking necessary infrastructure. Due to this, 21

people died in the floods in Adıyaman and Şanlıurfa in the earthquake region last month. Along with a number of tents, a container in Adıyaman was washed away with two people inside. Earthquake survivors also had to cope with rain and flood waters.

After the earthquakes, the government’s failure to send search-and-rescue teams to the region in a timely manner, deliver aid and organise the response caused public outrage. Tens of thousands of people had been condemned to death in a quake long predicted by scientists, while many survivors died under the rubble due to the failure of the government response.

This social opposition, combined with anger at the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising cost of living, has set alarm bells ringing in the government ahead of the upcoming May 14 elections. Erdoğan’s People’s Alliance risks losing both the presidency and its parliamentary majority.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government is desperate to reverse this and has begun taking measures in the face of a housing crisis facing millions of people. However, its measures are dictated exclusively by electoral calculations and the economic interests of the ruling class.

With a presidential decree on “settlement and construction within the scope of the state of emergency,” dated February 23 and issued by Erdoğan, it has become legally possible to open agricultural and forest areas in the region for construction for housing.

Against this, the faculty members of Istanbul Technical University (İTÜ) Department of Urban and Regional Planning issued a March 28 statement, declaring: “This decree disregards the accumulated knowledge of the field and profession of urban and

regional planning, which has a long history in Turkey, and has the potential to cause major problems in the medium and long term.”

They continued: “As TÜ Department of Urban Regional Planning, we call for the planning of all rural and urban settlements and new settlement areas in the region affected by the Kahramanmaraş and Gaziantep earthquakes in the light of the principles of social and spatial justice, environmental and economic sustainability and fair governance.”

On March 31, the university administration first blocked access to the website of the department where this statement was published, and then removed it. Professor Funda Yirmibeşoğlu, head of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, was then dismissed by the administration. Moreover, an investigation was initiated “regarding the publication of the statement on the website of the department.”

The first reaction to these decisions of the TÜ administration came from urban planners and academics on social media. Against Yirmibeşoğlu’s dismissal, students organized a protest on April 6, declaring that “universities, the home of science, cannot be expected to remain silent in a period of reconstruction [in the earthquake region] and that the intervention of the rectorate was unacceptable.”

In a press statement, the students stated: “The fact that there has been a rent- and capital-oriented construction until today has increased the destructiveness of the earthquake, and there has not been sufficient response in the region after the earthquake. In order to heal the wounds of the earthquake, the suggestions of our professors are aimed at ensuring planning that prioritizes life. We stand by our professors against the efforts to silence the universities!”

Scientists have repeatedly warned the government against starting construction of permanent housing while aftershocks continue in the earthquake zone. Without detailed ground surveys, scientific studies and urban planning, this paves the way for new disasters.

However, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate of the bourgeois opposition Nation Alliance—which has the support of Turkey’s various pseudo-left groups—pledged in a speech to “provide free housing” to earthquake victims who lost their homes.

He declared, however, that he agreed with Erdoğan that “earthquake housing should be built immediately.” This is an expression of the unanimity of the entire capitalist political establishment, which uses the earthquake disaster only as a tool in the election campaign, in disregarding science and public health.

The Erdoğan government’s order to “remove building rubble and construct new buildings as soon as possible” has revealed another major public health problem in the earthquake area: asbestos and other chemicals in the rubble.

Asbestos, lead and paint-related chemicals used in the construction of tens of thousands of now-demolished buildings are piling up on the edges of settlements, posing a massive cancer danger. Asbestos-containing dust is transmitted to people through breathing as they lift, load and store rubble. These carcinogenic substances are then mixed into groundwater and rivers with the rains. This cycle leads to a further danger of contamination of soil and vegetables with irrigation water, again posing a risk to the population.

Mass protests have been held in recent weeks in villages and neighbourhoods near rubble-dumping sites in the affected area, especially in Hatay and Malatya provinces. On April 4, the gendarmerie attacked a mass protest against rubble-dumping in Yeşilköy in Hatay’s Samandaş district and detained around 20 earthquake victims.

The fact that there is still a shortage of clean water and decent shelter in the earthquake area, and that new houses are being built with disregard for public health and safety is an indictment not only of the Erdoğan government but also of the capitalist system—the source of the “profit before lives” policy defended by the entire political establishment.



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