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Earthquake death toll in Turkey and Syria rising rapidly

The death toll in Turkey from the earthquake rose to 3,419 Tuesday morning, bringing the combined official death tolls from Turkey and Syria to more than 5,000.

A 7.7-magnitude earthquake struck at 4.17 a.m. local time yesterday in the center of Pazarcık district of Kahramanmaraş province, located in the Mediterranean region of Turkey. It was felt strongly in 10 neighboring provinces, as well as in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Cyprus.

As aftershocks of the first earthquake continued, a second major earthquake with a magnitude of 7.6 occurred at 13.24 a.m. in Elbistan district of Kahramanmaraş province. There are many continuing aftershocks in the region, which experts say could last for a year. An earthquake of magnitude 5.7 struck eastern Turkey, Tuesday.

Associated Press has received 11,342 reports of collapsed buildings, with over 20,000 injured so far.

In Syria, divided and devastated by the war for regime change launched by the NATO powers in 2011, reports so far put the death toll in the aftermath of the earthquake at over 1,500, with around 3,500 injured.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared “national mourning for seven days” yesterday evening. In a statement after the earthquakes, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu said, “We have set a level four alert. Level four is an alert that includes international aid.”

Rescue efforts involving over 24,000 personnel have been difficult due to the vast geographical area, bad weather conditions, damage to public buildings, roads and

facilities, and above all, the fact that the government and local authorities have invested almost nothing in earthquake preparedness infrastructure after years of warnings.

Despite statements by officials that the situation is “under control,” reports from the region show that rescue efforts are mainly in urban centers, while many small settlements have not yet received aid, and many people are waiting helplessly.

Public hospitals, Hatay Airport, municipal buildings, natural gas pipelines, electricity transformers and many intercity roads were among the sites damaged by the earthquakes. Snowy weather conditions are affecting the delivery of aid and dampening hopes of rescuing people still alive under the rubble.

Speaking on *Habertürk* TV yesterday, Hatay Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Lütfü Savaş said, “This is a disaster that a municipality cannot handle. We need search and rescue teams very quickly. We need both people and the tools and equipment to be used in this work.” He added, “It is 2-3 Celsius degrees outside right now. It is raining. It looks rainy tomorrow too. People may lose their lives from hypothermia, heat loss. So the faster it is, the more people we have a chance to reach.”

As search and rescue operations continue in the region, there is concern that the loss of life will increase dramatically. Appearing on journalist Cüneyt Özdemir’s online program last night, Gaziantep Mayor Fatma Şahin starkly declared, “Half of the [İslahiye] district with a population of 60,000 does not exist anymore. It is a disaster.”

The fact that the devastating consequences of yesterday’s earthquakes were entirely foreseeable and preventable underlines that what happened was social murder. The Erdoğan government, as well as local municipalities and relevant state institutions have turned a blind eye to the impending disaster. Millions of people in the region were left to their fate after the earthquakes because there is no serious preparation for such disasters.

Well-known geologist Prof. Naci Görür’s statements on *Fox TV* yesterday evening amounted to an indictment against the authorities. He referred to the Elazığ earthquake that occurred on the same fault line in 2020 and recalled that his team had drawn attention to the threat facing the Kahramanmaraş region at that time.

Görür said, “All sane geoscientists, including myself, said months and years ago that this earthquake was imminent. When the Elazığ earthquake happened, Çelek, Ermenek and Kahramanmaraş became targets [of new earthquakes]. Although we said this between 2020-23, we received no reaction from the local administrators in that region.”

He explained that their efforts to prevent the disastrous consequences of the earthquake were refused by officials, stating, “We prepared a project. We prepared a project by

involving the General Command of Mapping, we presented it to State Planning, we presented it to TÜBİTAK [the Scientific and Technological Research Institution of Turkey], but it was refused.”

In an interview with the daily *Cumhuriyet* the day before the earthquake, Görür criticized the same deadly policy against the expected major earthquake in Istanbul, saying, “The government said, ‘We will build 250,000 social housing in Istanbul. This is being done for a political purpose or for elections. Is there any point in building and selling houses in earthquake zones in Turkey when hundreds of thousands of people are not safe?’”

He asked, “Should the people inside be left to die? Elections are coming but earthquakes are not on the agenda. What is the benefit to the country of an understanding that does not think about human beings and the right to life?”

Turkey is located on active fault lines. The Anatolian peninsula is pushed 2.5cm westward every year under the pressure of the Arabian and Eurasian plates that make up the earth’s crust. As a result of these plates compressing each other in Turkey’s geography, big earthquakes occur frequently.

Despite these scientific facts, many cities in Turkey are built on active fault lines. For years, no official work has been done. Cities are not moved to solid ground, nor are old buildings made earthquake resistant. In the name of urban transformation, workers and the poor are pushed out of the city centers, and luxury residences for the rich are built in their place. Legal measures and inspections to supposedly guarantee that buildings are earthquake-resistant are toothless measures geared to the cynical election promises of bourgeois parties.