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Death toll in Turkey-Syria quake nears 25,000, reports expose Turkish government's criminality

As the earthquake disaster on the Turkish-Syrian border enters its fifth day, the death toll is set to reach a staggering 25,000. As of yesterday evening, total deaths in Turkey, where some 80,000 people were reportedly injured, exceeded 20,665, while deaths in Syria reached 3,500. Tens of thousands of people are thought to still be under the rubble in both countries, and at least 6 million people have been left homeless by the quake.

The Turkish Catastrophe Insurance Pool (TCIP) announced having received over 30,000 “damage reports” after the quake that devastated ten cities in Turkey. In Syria, where the first international aid only reached Thursday, over 900 buildings collapsed and about 2,000 buildings were damaged, according to the *Gazete Duvar*.



People bury their loved ones, victims of Monday earthquake, in Adiyaman, Turkey, Friday, Feb. 10, 2023. Emergency crews made a series of dramatic rescues in Turkey on

Friday, pulling several people, some almost unscathed, from the rubble, four days after a catastrophic earthquake killed more than 20,000. [AP Photo/Emrah Gurel]

One of the most striking images of the social catastrophe in the region was of the mass grave where thousands of people were buried in Adiyaman. The situation is similar in other cities hit by the earthquake.

Journalists working for media outlets outside the government's control and social media users are reporting that there are still problems in the affected provinces in meeting basic needs such as electricity, water, natural gas, shelter and sanitation.

An aid volunteer in Hatay's Antakya district, one of the hardest-hit areas, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that only on the third day of the earthquake did heavy equipment begin search and rescue operations, in a district which looked “as if an atomic bomb had been dropped.” Before that, people used picks and shovels to dig out those under the rubble, and critical hours were wasted.



Turkish rescue workers carry Ergin Guzeloglan, 36, to an ambulance after pulled him out from a collapsed building five days after an earthquake in Hatay, southern Turkey, early Saturday, Feb. 11, 2023. Emergency crews made a series of dramatic rescues in Turkey on Friday, pulling several people, some almost unscathed, from the rubble, four days after a catastrophic earthquake. [AP Photo/Can Ozer]

The aid volunteer said there is still no large-scale operation except for search and rescue teams from a few Istanbul district municipalities. There is still no phone reception and no

Internet. Only a few tents have been set up at the entrance to the city, and most people are still spending the night on the streets with fires. A cholera outbreak has begun.

Official figures show that yesterday Turkey surpassed the death toll threshold of the great Marmara Earthquake of 1999. This 7.4 magnitude earthquake that struck nearly a quarter of a century ago killed 17,480 people in five provinces, according to official reports. But some unofficial reports put the actual death toll at over 50,000.

However, the 2023 earthquake, centered in Kahramanmaraş, came after decades of massive advances in industry and construction technology worldwide and in Turkey, improved earthquake regulations, and persistent warnings from scientists.

The Union of Turkish Bar Associations (TBB) has filed a criminal complaint against “authorized and responsible contractors and officials who took part in the construction of the buildings that collapsed in the earthquake, and those who approved and failed to inspect the projects of the collapsed buildings,” and demanded they are prosecuted for “intentional homicide” and “negligent homicide.”

It is clear who should be put on trial. Responsibility for this massive social crime belongs to the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in particular, and to the entire state and political establishment that failed to take necessary safety measures.

The Erdoğan government's response to the earthquake has focused more on covering it up than on promptly coming to the aid of earthquake victims above and below the rubble.

Speaking yesterday in Adıyaman, facing enormous social anger and opposition that could not be suppressed, Erdoğan said, “There have been some shortcomings in this process, but our state has rushed to the rescue of citizens with all its means.” He then admitted, “It is a fact that we could not speed up the interventions as much as we would have liked.” Nevertheless, he attacked those who criticized his government's bankrupt response to the earthquake disaster as “political looters.”

With the monthly poverty line for a family of four around 29,000 TL (US\$1,540) and a minimum wage of 8,500 TL (US\$450), Erdoğan announced that earthquake victims will receive only 10,000 TL (US\$530) per household.

This is a continuation of the government's policy. It has not allocated resources to save tens of thousands of lives by building earthquake-resilient cities in the 10 provinces hit by the quake, or in Istanbul, where scientists expect an earthquake of over 7-magnitude in the coming years. Instead, it has poured hundreds of billions into the banks, the major corporations and military spending.

As scientists have underlined, no party of the capitalist establishment has mobilized or campaigned against the government's official neglect policy towards coming earthquake disasters in Kahramanmaraş or Istanbul.

Geologist Prof. Dr. Naci Görür, who has drawn attention to the growing danger of earthquakes in the region, especially in the last three years, demanding immediate measures are taken, again pointed out the danger to Istanbul after Monday's earthquake. "The probability of an earthquake [in Istanbul] within 30 years, at any time since 1999, was 62 percent. We have spent 23 years. 62 percent probability has increased to around 70 percent. We are now in overtime."

Since the earthquake, Erdoğan has repeatedly claimed that it was impossible to be prepared for such a massive disaster in order to deny his government's responsibility. Both the analyses of scientists and the reports of Turkish state institutions themselves refute this argument.

Prof. David Alexander, an expert in emergency planning and management at University College London, told the BBC, "The maximum intensity for this earthquake was violent but not necessarily enough to bring well-constructed buildings down."

Despite improvements in earthquake regulations in 2018, there was corruption in practice, Prof. Alexander added. "In most places the level of shaking was less than the maximum, so we can conclude out of the thousands of buildings that collapsed, almost all of them don't stand up to any reasonably expected earthquake construction code."

The BBC report pointed to Turkish government "construction amnesties... effectively legal exemptions for the payment of a fee, for structures built without the required safety certificates." Pelin Pınar Giritlioğlu, Istanbul head of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects' Chamber of City Planners, said, "Up to 75,000 buildings across the affected earthquake zone in southern Turkey have been given construction amnesties." The last "construction amnesty" was in 2018.

A January-June 2022 report by the Turkish Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change Ministry stated that a total of 244,607 unsafe buildings were identified in 81 provinces across Turkey, of which 2,512 were in Hatay, 1,765 in Kahramanmaraş and 1,239 in Adıyaman. In 10 provinces, including these three, the number of buildings officially said to have been completely collapsed is around 6,500.

In Istanbul, a city of 16 million inhabitants, 84,000 unsafe buildings were identified. Hundreds of thousands of people living in these buildings are vulnerable to an imminent earthquake.

Despite this, according to the daily *BirGün*, during the earthquake disaster district municipal councils in Istanbul, governed by Erdoğan's AKP, convened and "green areas were opened for construction in the February session of the municipal councils." This means further reducing the already very limited gathering areas after earthquakes.

The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), affiliated to the Interior Ministry and coordinating the earthquake response, was revealed to be completely unprepared for a disaster directly affecting 13 million people in Turkey alone. AFAD, which responded to the earthquake with only around 8,000 search and rescue personnel, confirmed that it was understaffed in its own 2019 report.

According to *T24*, the report noted that "the division of duties, authorities and responsibilities within the institution has not been made sufficiently clear," "structural and functional integration has not yet been fully achieved due to the merger of three institutions that were previously in operation," and "some search and rescue technicians cannot take active roles in search and rescue services."

AFAD's budget was cut by one-third in 2023. Its response to the magnitude-6 earthquake in the northwestern city of Düzce on November 23, 2022, already made clear the inadequacy of the institution and criminal neglect of the government. In its report on this 2022 Düzce earthquake, in which no one died under the rubble, AFAD expressed its own shortcomings as follows:

After the earthquake, Turkey Disaster Response Plan (TAMP) could not be put into effect because disaster groups and institutions were not sufficiently prepared. Since TAMP could not be implemented, disaster management turned into chaos and confusion, leading to confusion of duties and authorities. Decisions could not be taken properly due to lack of communication. Disaster response groups were not able to manage their resources effectively, which resulted in inadequate response.

This led to the late and inadequate response to the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake, resulting in tens of thousands of preventable deaths and leaving tens of thousands more trapped under the rubble.

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