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As death toll rises past 35,000, earthquake in Turkey and Syria now one of the greatest disasters in the 21st century



Cranes remove debris next to destroyed buildings in Antakya, south-central Turkey, Friday, February 10, 2023. [AP Photo/Hussein Malla]

The twin earthquakes that devastated south-central Turkey and northern Syria last Monday have produced a disaster whose toll in death, destruction and mass suffering is apocalyptic. Nearly 35,000 are dead, according to official figures, and that number is rising steadily. Entire cities have been leveled. And millions are now facing deprivation and further death in mid-winter weather, with aid that is grossly inadequate compared to the enormous need.

United Nations relief coordinator Martin Griffiths said that the reported death toll is likely to “double or more.” He added, grimly, “Soon, the search and rescue people will make

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way for the humanitarian agencies whose job it is to look after the extraordinary numbers of those affected for the next months.” According to the World Health Organization, nearly 26 million people have been directly impacted by the quake, and many of these will face the threat of hunger, disease and physical and psychological trauma.

The colossal scale of the disaster is difficult to grasp from the reports in the corporate media, which inevitably focus on a handful of successful rescues rather than on the thousands of bodies hauled out of collapsed buildings. Even the aerial photos of mass graves, taken by drone-mounted cameras, only give a glimpse of the dimensions of this tragedy.

The tremor exploded along 300 miles of fault line—roughly the distance from Detroit to Chicago, or Paris to London. According to a NASA geophysicist, “This generated extremely strong shaking over a very large area that hit many cities and towns full of people. The rupture length and magnitude of the 7.8 earthquake were similar to the 1906 earthquake that destroyed San Francisco.”

Entire cities have been laid waste, some of them steeped in millennia of history. The ancient city of Marash, a crossroads of the Near East, now the modern city of Kahramanmaraş, with a population of 600,000, was the epicenter of the quake. The ancient city of Antioch, now the modern city of Antakya, population 400,000, has been virtually destroyed.

A few comparisons: the February 6 earthquake is already the fifth-worst natural disaster of the 21st century in terms of death toll, and will likely soon be third-worst, behind only the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which killed as many as 316,000 people, and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, in which an estimated 228,000 people died across 14 countries, with Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India hardest hit.

Those areas were among the poorest in the world: Haiti, the poorest in the Western hemisphere, but also the regions around the Indian Ocean where the tidal wave struck with full force. Turkey, however, is a country of middle income, with a large industrial base, a fully qualified candidate for entry into the European Union, although blocked for political reasons. Millions of Turkish workers make up a substantial component of the working class in Germany, Europe’s economic powerhouse.

The manifest failure of the Turkish government’s response is therefore not due to lack of access to technology or skilled labor or economic resources. It is entirely due to the financial considerations of Turkish and global capitalism, which reject spending on long-

term infrastructure, such as ensuring buildings in major fault zones are able to withstand earthquakes, in favor of short-term maximization of profits.

The right-wing government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is more concerned about the potential political impact of the disaster than its human toll. A handful of building owners have been arrested to serve as scapegoats for systematic government corruption in the oversight of the construction industry, and to cover up the regime's record of refusing to heed the warnings of scientists about earthquake dangers. There are bloodcurdling threats against looters, and reportedly more police sent to the region to suppress the population than relief workers to save lives.

While the Erdogan government certainly bears responsibility for this catastrophe, blame must be focused on the imperialist powers, and above all the United States, which has devastated the entire region in pursuit of global domination.

In Syria, the imperialist blockade has had such a savage impact that Griffiths of the UN said the world has “failed the people in north-west Syria... They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived.”

US sanctions on Syria have blocked the flow of relief supplies, while US troops occupying parts of the country to control its oil production have stood by rather than provide aid to the victims of the earthquake. Amidst the devastation, the “mission” of the US military is to continue its regime-change operation, while subjecting tens of thousands of Syrians to barbaric conditions of imprisonment.

The pathetic sums offered in aid from the wealthy countries are dwarfed by their vast expenditures on the war against Russia over Ukraine and on the overall military build-up towards World War III, which would turn the entire world into a replica of the hellish scenes in the earthquake zone, and worse.

The US and European powers are presently flooding Ukraine with tanks and fighter jets, but when it comes to a massive social catastrophe, a pittance is offered. So much for the pretenses of “humanitarian” imperialism.

On Friday, the Pentagon comptroller confirmed that in its budget to be delivered March 9, the Biden administration will request the largest amount of military spending in American history, close to \$900 billion. Meanwhile, the administration will provide \$85 million, one-ten-thousandth that amount, for the relief of Turkish and Syrian survivors of the quake. Even this will be utilized in a way to advance the interests of American imperialism in both Syria and Turkey.

Only in the working class is there evidence of the enormous sympathy and solidarity of ordinary people for the plight of their brothers and sisters in Turkey and Syria. Aid workers from throughout the world have rushed to the scene, joining the tens of thousands of survivors seeking frantically to dig their spouses, children, parents and neighbors out of the mountain of rubble. Coal miners, who themselves risk death daily from cave-ins and explosions in Turkey's notoriously dangerous mines, have trekked to the region to lend their assistance and expertise.

But these efforts have been held back by the drastic shortage of the necessary equipment and technical expertise to conduct successful rescue operations—the responsibility of the major imperialist powers, which enjoy a near-monopoly in that sphere.

One week ago, the WSW pointed to the contradiction between the vast development of science and industry worldwide, which makes earthquake-resistant cities fully possible, and the constant neglect of social infrastructure and disaster-relief preparations. This commentary drew the conclusion:

All major social issues today, including averting natural disasters, are by nature global problems requiring a socially coordinated solution. Yet the private profit interests of the bourgeoisie and the division of the world into rival nation-states stand in the way of any progressive response. This is why there has been no worldwide scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic or to global climate change...

The obstacle to a planned, rational response to urgent social problems can only be removed by a frontal attack by the international working class on the power and wealth of the ruling class, thereby subordinating private profit to social need. The preventable devastation of yesterday's earthquakes has demonstrated once again the urgent necessity of replacing capitalism with global socialism.

The week since these words were written has fully confirmed this declaration. It is urgently necessary for working people throughout the world to raise with redoubled force the demand for emergency aid to the people of Syria and Turkey, the lifting of all sanctions and blockades, and a vast program to rebuild the devastated region.

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