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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.02.2023

Turkey-Syria earthquake death toll tops 41,000: A colossal social crime

The devastating consequences of the 7.7 and 7.6 magnitude earthquakes that struck on the Turkey-Syria border on Monday, February 6 continues to worsen. Yesterday, the official death toll in Turkey rose by nearly 4,000 to 35,418, while the death toll in Syria exceeded 5,800. More than 8,000 people have so far been rescued in Turkey, but it is still unknown how many people remain under the rubble in both countries.



Six days after an earthquake, people line up for water in Kahramanmaraş, Turkey on February 12, 2023. [AP Photo/Emrah Gurel]

Thousands of those who died were children. UNICEF estimates that more than 7 million children were affected. In its report yesterday, UNICEF said: “While the total number of children affected remains unclear, 4.6 million children live in the 10 provinces of Turkey hit by the earthquakes, and more than 2.5 million children are affected in Syria.”

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“We are witnessing the worst natural disaster in the WHO [World Health Organization] European region for a century, and we are still learning about its magnitude,” Hans Kluge, WHO regional director for Europe, said yesterday. He added, “The needs are huge and increasing by the hour. Some 26 million people across both countries need humanitarian assistance.”

Scientists and experts agree that the February 6 earthquakes, which caused devastation across hundreds of kilometres, were historic. However, this does not mean that the devastating consequences of the earthquakes were not foreseen or could not have been prevented. On the contrary, for years, geologists and other scientists, both in Turkey and internationally, have been drawing attention to the danger of earthquakes in the region and calling for the necessary safety measures to be taken quickly.

However, no safety measures were taken by the state. Moreover, in 2018, the government, with the complicity of the opposition parties in parliament, granted a “construction amnesty” to around 75,000 buildings in the earthquake zone that did not comply with building codes.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government is working deliberately to cover up its obvious responsibility for this social catastrophe. Erdoğan, who spoke of “fate” immediately after the earthquake, claiming that “it is not possible to be prepared for such a major catastrophe,” now speaks of the “disaster of the century,” calling it an “exceptional natural event” in every speech.

But Erdoğan’s own statement yesterday after his cabinet meeting points to the criminality of his government. He tried to create a “success story” out of a disaster that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and devastated millions, stating: “The fact that 98 percent of all buildings collapsed in the recent disaster were built before 1999 shows the progress we have made in building standards and inspections, but also reminds us that we need to tighten our grip.”

In the region, where scientists warned that a major earthquake was imminent, especially after the nearby Elazığ earthquake in 2020, many cities were built on fault lines, and many buildings were found to be unsafe by Turkish officials. Despite experts’ warnings, city plans were not changed, nor were buildings made earthquake-resistant. Millions of people were instead left to their fate. The main reason for this was that such a long-term investment, requiring extensive state expenditure, was not considered profitable.

The extent of the destruction in Turkey's 10 provinces was evident even in the incomplete report Erdoğan released yesterday. Analyzing 369,000 buildings in the region, it found that 47,000 were collapsed, in urgent need of demolition, or heavily damaged.

“We will relieve the pain, heal the wounds and compensate the losses of this disaster together, without ever falling into frustration, weariness, fatigue or despair,” Erdoğan said, as if the loss of 35,000 lives could be compensated. He announced that new buildings would be built for earthquake victims “away from the fault lines within a few months.” Had this step been taken in 2020 or before, based on the warnings and guidance of scientists, tens of thousands of people would still be alive.

Erdoğan's statements yesterday were marked by staggering indifference to those who died in the quake, as well as by announcements of social expenditures to appease social anger. He said that 100,000 Turkish liras (TL), or US\$5,310, of “cash aid” would go to those who lost relatives in the earthquake. He claimed that Turkish banks would transfer 50 billion TL (US\$2.65 billion) of their 2022 profits to earthquake relief efforts. The sector's total net profit in 2022 was 433 billion TL (US\$23 billion).

Erdoğan also announced that members of his cabinet had donated a total of 136 million TL (US\$7.22 million) to earthquake victims. That such a sum can be collected from a 19-person cabinet reveals the huge social inequality in Turkey, where the monthly minimum wage is only 8,500 TL (US\$450).

However, if the Erdoğan government and financial oligarchy felt obliged to make a social concession, however small, it is because they fear the massive social anger they face. At the same time, they are whipping up fascistic campaigns to try to divert this social anger against Syrian refugees.

But millions of people who have lost loved ones due to the lack of public health measures in the COVID-19 pandemic, and who are struggling with the surging cost of living, are outraged at those responsible for an entirely preventable disaster. People are furious both that millions of people had to live in buildings fated to collapse in a big quake, and that those under the rubble after the quake were abandoned to their fate.

In Adıyaman, where thousands lost their lives in the earthquake, a health worker went on the Habertürk TV live broadcast yesterday. Expressing the anger of millions, she said: “Adıyaman was left alone for three days. We had to close our ears to people's screams [under the rubble] because there was no help [to rescue them]. People died of hunger and cold. Let the President come to Adıyaman, does he have a face to come here? ... Children died. Is this a disaster management?” And at the end, she made a call: “Wake up Turkey!”

Amid the massive destruction and loss of life, the political establishment has begun to focus on the presidential and parliamentary elections, previously scheduled for May this year. Some in Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) have called to postpone the elections because of the earthquake. According to the constitution, however, elections can only be postponed in a "state of war."

The bourgeois opposition parties rapidly rejected the proposal to postpone the elections. Even before the quake, Erdoğan had suffered a significant loss of support amid the deepening economic and social crisis.

Although it is unclear when the elections will be held, one thing is certain: Neither the People's Alliance led by Erdoğan nor the Nation Alliance of the bourgeois opposition parties can safeguard the lives and safety of the people against earthquakes. Both alliances are defenders of the capitalist system that is the main source of this social slaughter.

The level of scientific and technological development in Turkey and around the world makes it possible to build earthquake-resistant buildings and cities. This is not done because the capitalist state and big business subordinate the most crucial social needs to the profit principle. The way forward for workers is to mobilize based on a socialist programme against capitalism, both to hold those responsible for this disaster to account and to put an end to the "profit before lives" policy.

World Socialist 16.02.2022