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Official death toll in Turkish-Syrian earthquake exceeds 53,000

Officially the death toll in the two February 6 earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş, which created devastation in both Turkey and Syria, has reached to 53,000 people. There are 45,089 confirmed fatalities in Turkey and 8,476 in Syria.



Aerial photo shows collapsed buildings and destruction in Hatay, Turkey, on Feb. 7. [AP Photo/IHA]

The actual death toll is thought to be much higher, including those who have not been pulled from the rubble, those who have not been identified, and unregistered refugees. One Turkish official assigned to the affected area admitted that the real number of deaths could be reach 150,000 or more in Turkey alone.

According to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's remarks yesterday, 3.5 million people have migrated from the region. He said that 214,000 buildings have been identified in the region as being "collapsed, urgently to be demolished or heavily damaged." This

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statement itself is an indictment of both the national government and local authorities. For years, they have allowed millions of people to live in unsafe buildings despite all scientific warnings that such an earthquake was expected, and even imminent.

The obvious responsibility of all the factions of the ruling class, especially the Erdoğan government, for this preventable social disaster has created enormous anger alongside the grief for the many people who lost their lives. Despite warnings, no preparations were taken against earthquakes. The fact that search-and-rescue operations started at the earliest on the third day after the quake increased the loss of life even more.

The government, focusing more on covering up its own criminality than on search-and-rescue and the relief efforts for earthquake victims, prematurely started debris removal work. Nearly one month after the earthquake, the basic needs of the people in the region, such as shelter and sanitation, are still not fully met. This is further underlined by the revelation that the Turkish Red Crescent, a state-sponsored aid organization, sold off tents, food and clothing for commercial purposes after the earthquake.

Meanwhile, the government is trying to suppress growing social opposition ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections expected in May, even as the cost of living continues to explode.

Thousands of football fans chanted “Government resign” during the major matches in Istanbul last weekend. Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu threatened the fans about the slogans in the stadiums. He said, “Let them not interrupt our work... Let me see if you can!”

Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), an ally of President Erdoğan, also has called for sports matches to be played without spectators.

Turkey’s ruling parties, terrified of growing public anger at the state’s responsibility in the quake disaster, is trying to silence the public with police repression. Fenerbahçe football fans have been banned from attending the match this week. In addition, fans who chanted anti-government slogans during the matches played on the weekend were banned from entering the stadiums “for life” and are now to be obliged to sign in at the police station during match hours.

The government, which did not mobilize civilian and military forces for a long time after the earthquake, has started targeting groups organizing relief efforts in the quake zone. In the past week, the Hatay Governor’s Office tried to evacuate the solidarity centers of various political parties and of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) in the Defne district.

The police attacked the protest of People's Houses (Halkevleri) members, detaining eight. The office of the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) in Kadıköy, İstanbul was also blocked by the police, and party members prevented from loading aid trucks. The police attacked a protest held by the Left Party and detained over 70 people. Members of the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) were also detained in Osmaniye.

At the same time, Erdoğan is trying to quell public anger over the evident bankruptcy of his government's response to the earthquake disaster. "Unfortunately, we could not work in Adıyaman in the first few days as effectively as we would have liked. We could not come on the first day due to weather and road conditions," Erdoğan said on Monday, speaking from earthquake-hit Adıyaman province.

He added, "For this, I ask for your blessings for the first few days. We are aware of everything and no one should doubt that we have done and will do what is necessary."

Following Erdoğan's ask for "blessings," thousands of people rejected his demand on social media. After leaving the earthquake zone, however, he told a meeting of his Justice and Development Party (AKP): "Asking for blessing is not a sign of our weakness, but a sign of sincerity between us and our nation."

Erdoğan and all the authorities continue to deny responsibility for this historic catastrophe. And once again ignoring the warnings of scientists, the government is rushing to fulfill its promise to build hundreds of thousands of buildings in the affected area in a year. "We have started building new living spaces," Erdoğan announced yesterday, while experts warn that new buildings must not be built while aftershocks continue.

According to recent statements, there have been about 12,000 aftershocks in the region since February 6, and these aftershocks might continue for more than a year. Experts state that reinforced concrete buildings should not be built due to the continuation of aftershocks.

Speaking to the Sputnik Türkçe, Cemal Gökçe, a board member of the Earthquake Foundation and former president of the Chamber of Civil Engineers, said, "The aftershocks continue... It is wrong to start construction immediately. Making such a decision in terms of comforting people means calling for a new disaster."

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