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One year since the Turkey-Syria earthquake—Part I

This is the first part of a three-part series.

Tragedy continues in the earthquake region

One year ago, on February 6, two devastating earthquakes measuring 7.7 and 7.6 on the Richter scale struck within nine hours in the southern Turkish city of Kahramanmaraş, near the Syrian border, killing tens of thousands of people and leaving millions homeless. Hundreds of thousands of people in the region are still living in containers or tents.

That the problems of the majority of the earthquake victims still exist after one year, that no one was really held responsible, that the promises of the government have not been fulfilled and that the central and local authorities have not made serious preparations for new earthquake threats, especially those expected in the Marmara region, reveals the indifference of the ruling class and the entire political establishment towards the life and safety of the working masses.



People and emergency teams search for people in the rubble of a destroyed building in Gaziantep, Turkey, Monday, February 6, 2023. [AP Photo/Mustafa Karali]

This indifference was exposed by the inadequacy of rescue efforts in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Many of those who died in the earthquake had been trapped for days under the rubble, hoping in vain to be rescued. Those who somehow managed to get out were desperate to respond to calls for help from the rubble.

The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan failed to provide a quick and organised response to the earthquake disaster in the first hours and days after the earthquake, when search and rescue operations should have been carried out as quickly as possible. The government's lack of serious preparation and organisation in Turkey, which is an earthquake-prone country, and its inability to bring search, rescue and relief teams and supplies from inside and outside the country to the region, provoked widespread social anger.

Erdoğan admitted that the government was almost paralysed in the first days after the earthquake when he said while visiting the region about a month later, “Unfortunately, we could not work as effectively as we would have liked in Adıyaman in the first days.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has extensively covered the disaster, explained in its first [Perspective](#), the earthquake that devastated southern Turkey and northern Syria, which recognize no artificial national borders, has catastrophically demonstrated the global character of all major social problems and the need for an international socialist solution. “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.”

Almost nothing has been done in the intervening year to prevent new disasters in these two countries, or in earthquake-prone areas of the world where, according to the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, at least 1.5 billion people live. This confirms the bankruptcy of the capitalist system and the urgent necessity for socialism.

The death toll is still unknown

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by Erdoğan has not been able to provide any definitive information about the real death toll yet, despite the fact that a year has passed.

On April 22, then Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu announced that 50,783 people had died and 107,204 had been injured. Four days before the first anniversary, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya updated these figures to 53,537 dead and 107,213 injured and said that 38,901 buildings had collapsed.

On 13 February 2023, the governor of Şırnak, Osman Bilgin, said in a speech leaked on social media that the death toll, then reported at 31,000, could be “3-4, maybe 5 times worse.” The fact that there are still many missing people in the region and that excavations have unearthed bodies from under the rubble strengthens claims that the real death toll is much higher than the official figure.

According to official figures, over 14 million Turkish citizens were registered in the provinces affected by the earthquake. This represents 16 percent of the country's population. It means that one in six Turkish citizens was directly affected by the earthquake.

The number of Syrians under “temporary protection” in the region was officially 1.7 million. In other words, about half of all Syrians living in Turkey were in the region directly affected by the earthquake. It is not known how many refugees were included in the official tolls.



People remove their furniture and household appliances out of a collapsed building following a devastating earthquake in the town of Jinderis, Aleppo province, Syria, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2023. [AP Photo/Ghaith Alsayed]

In Syria, which has been devastated for years by the imperialist powers led by the US and its allies such as Turkey and subjected to sanctions and embargoes, nearly 10,000 people lost their lives and thousands were injured as a result of the earthquake, according to official figures. The destruction in Syria after the earthquake was largely ignored by the bourgeois and pseudo-leftist press. Due to the US-led embargo, almost no regular aid could be delivered to the earthquake zone in Syria and to the survivors.

No improvement in conditions

One year on, earthquake survivors on both sides of the border continue to struggle with economic hardship and difficult living conditions.

Hundreds of thousands of people in the earthquake zone are still living in unhealthy conditions such as containers, tents and shacks.



City of Adiyaman after 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Turkey. Excavators have begun removing debris from Adiyaman city in southeastern Turkey that was devastated by the massive earthquake. Survivors have been accommodated in tents. [Photo by Mohammad Hossein Velayati / [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)]

There is a lack of clean water and sanitation and a shortage of showers and toilets means there is a widespread outbreak of scabies and lice throughout the region.

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Hospital access are inadequate due to earthquake damage, which means that surgeries and examinations cannot be carried out and people with serious illnesses such as cancer cannot be treated. State resources have still not been mobilised even for these issues.

People living in tent cities and containers faced pest problems such as insects and snakes, especially during the hot summer months. With the onset of winter, temperatures dropped to minus 10 degrees Celsius at night in some quake-affected areas, causing health problems for many people, especially children and the elderly. Earthquake survivors are forced to light stoves in tents and containers to keep warm, posing a life-threatening risk.

Reports of fires in tents and containers and earthquake victims poisoned by stove gas are common in the press.

Due to a lack of planning and foresight, existing tent and container cities have been set up in unsuitable areas without the necessary infrastructure. Every time it rains or storms, the tents and containers are ruined and survivors have to deal with flooding. About a month after the earthquake, heavy rains in the region washed away some tents and a container with two people inside in Adıyaman, and floods in Adıyaman and Şanlıurfa officially killed 21 people.

The lack of adequate efforts to protect the physical and psychological health of earthquake victims is seen by public health experts as a key issue.

There is also inadequate public transport and roads are still unsuitable for traffic.

Hatay, which includes the historic city of Antioch, still looks like a ruin. In the city, which the government handed over to construction companies without any planning, demolition work continues unchecked on many streets, while heavily damaged buildings awaiting demolition can be seen all over the city.

The dust generated in the city by uncontrolled demolition and excavation work causes acute respiratory and lung problems and asbestos in concrete rubble poses a serious threat to public health. The authorities claim that there is no asbestos in the air in the earthquake zone, but research shows otherwise. Scientists say that even a fibre of food containing asbestos entering the human body can cause serious health problems.

To be continued

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