

WORLD AFFAIRS

Aftershock

The February 6 earthquake that destroyed large parts of south-eastern Türkiye and north-western Syria left nearly 50,000 dead. A global rescue effort began almost at once and continued to throw up survival stories that are nothing short of miracles.

BY IFTIKHAR GILANI



IN THE EARLY HOURS OF FEBRUARY 6, THE officer on duty at the seismological observatory stationed on a hillside on the outskirts of the town of Andirin in Kahramanmaraş province in Türkiye's Mediterranean region was making coffee when he got the shock of his life. Not only did the building shake, but to his surprise, the pin that traced the narrow wavy line on the seismographs also vibrated violently. The needle soon swung beyond the width of the paper roll, indicating a major earthquake with its epicentre in the nearby town of Pazarcık.

Around the same time, about 150 kilometres away, a hill that is home to the easternmost base of the US Army and NATO overlooking the town of Incirlik in Adana province shook. It was 4:17 am local time when soldiers saw a dust storm covering the sky as if bombers were raiding the region.

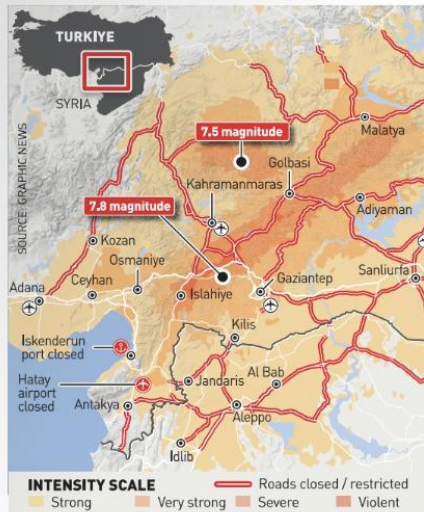
AT LEAST 3,800 AFTERSHOCKS

Two major earthquakes, measuring 7.7 and 7.6, happened and they killed more than 40,000 people and affected about 12 million people in Türkiye alone. And so far there have been at least 3,800 aftershocks. Rescue teams are still searching for bodies, and experts believe the final toll could exceed 50,000 in Türkiye alone. Turkish government officials have so far confirmed that 19,000 multi-storey homes have been destroyed and

IN KAHRAMANMARAS, on February 12, six days after earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye.

February 6: Epicentre and intensity

Nearly 50,000 people are known to have died in Türkiye and Syria, and the number is climbing. More than 12 million people have been affected.



SOME OF THE WORST EARTHQUAKES OF THE PAST 25 YEARS

- 2023, February 6:** Türkiye and Syria; magnitude 7.8; 41,000+ killed
- 2022, June 22:** Afghanistan; magnitude 6.1; 1,100+
- 2021, Aug. 14:** Haiti; magnitude 7.2; 2,200+
- 2018, September 28:** Indonesia (triggers tsunami); 4,300+
- 2015, April 25:** Nepal; magnitude 7.8; 8,800+
- 2011, March 11:** Japan (triggers tsunami); 18,400+
- 2010, January 12:** Haiti; magnitude 7; 3,16,000
- 2008, May 12:** Sichuan, China; magnitude 7.9; 87,500+
- 2006, May 27:** Java, Indonesia; magnitude 6.3; 5,700+
- 2005, March 28:** Sumatra, Indonesia; magnitude 8.6; 1,300+
- 2005, October 8:** Pakistan Occupied Kashmir; magnitude 7.6; 80,000+
- 2004, December 26:** Indonesia (triggers Indian Ocean tsunami); magnitude 9.1; about 2,30,000 killed in 12 countries
- 2003, May 21:** Algeria; magnitude 6.8; 2,200+
- 2003, December 26:** Iran; magnitude 6.6; 20,000+
- 2001, January 26:** Gujarat; magnitude 7.6; 20,000+

Deadliest earthquakes

Two recent tremors—the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 2004 and the 2010 Haiti quake—are among the most deadly in history, jointly claiming more than 5.43 million lives.



CHINA (1556)
8,30,000
8



HAITI (2010)
3,16,000
7

30,000 others partially damaged. According to the Ministry of Health, some 75 hospitals in these provinces have been damaged by the earthquakes and aftershocks.

In addition to the epicentre of Kahramanmaraş, which is an ancient human settlement, nine other provinces, some of them along the Syrian border—Adana, Osmaniye, Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis, Sanliurfa, Adiyaman, Diyarbakir, and Malatya—were turned into ruins. The affected area is spread across 1,00,000 square kilometres and stretches for about 700 km, by itself unprecedented in recent times in terms of the extent of area affected by an earthquake. In addition, five provinces of Syria across the border—Latika, Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqah, and Al-Hasakah—have also been severely affected.

It took Ayan Guldogan, a journalist who works for a local news station in the rural district of Suruc in Türkiye's border province of Sanliurfa, a while to realise that it was an earthquake. In a phone conversation with *Frontline*, Guldogan said his news instincts initially led him to believe that a war had broken out, as he had been waiting to cover the Turkish military offensive against US-backed Kurdish forces in Syria for the past several months.

"It was also snowing in the region," Guldogan said. "I saw dust and smoke rising from the city of Urfa. It looked like a nuclear bomb had been dropped." His house had survived the massive earthquake.

The quake passed, but within 15 minutes another one occurred just as Guldogan's family was going back inside to escape the freezing temperatures. Before his eyes, Guldogan saw the building collapse like a deck of cards. Within minutes, he was homeless and lucky to survive.

In nearby Gaziantep province, on the outskirts of its capital with the same name, Oktay Yalcin, a news anchor who lives on a hill, had a similar experience. Together with his brother, Yalcin rushed to the city centre and found it in ruins. All the large shopping malls, theatres, and nightclubs that had been filled with weekenders just a few hours ago were flattened.

LUCKY ESCAPE

Burak Karacaoglu, who works for Türkiye's Anadolu Agency news service in Hatay, had to spend hours among the rubble. "I was groping in the dark, feeling my way with my hands," Karacaoglu said. "The debris had blocked the door." At daybreak, he saw that the quake had punched a hole in the wall. "I enlarged the hole with something I picked up, I do not remember exactly what," he said. "I got my kids through the hole and out onto the street. Eventually, we were standing in the street in our night clothes and no shoes. It was raining and freezing."



MEHMET KACMAZ/GETTY IMAGES

RESCUE TEAMS, firemen, and volunteers work to evacuate a victim on February 9 in Elbistan, Türkiye.

It took three days to put out the fire at the Turkish port of Iskenderun in Hatay province on the Mediterranean coast. The port, which is home to the largest of Türkiye's three naval training centres, caught fire when containers were overturned by aftershocks.

Gaziantep Castle, a structure more than 2,000 years old, was severely damaged. Situated in a region with geological fault lines that are prone to tectonic shifts and tremors, it had withstood many quakes, but not this time.

MIRACLES HAPPEN

People who reached Ankara and Istanbul reported that they had to spend the night warming themselves by a fire they had lit outside. They reported that rescue workers struggled to cope with the freezing weather, shaky infrastructure, and chaos, especially after dark. Local footage from affluent and industrialised Gaziantep and multicul-

tural Hatay showed many residents sitting in the streets around small fires. Those who could find a tent were the lucky ones. Amid the scenes of death and destruction, miracles continued to happen as more and more survivors were recovered alive from the rubble days after the earthquake. In Hatay province, a two-month-old baby was rescued from the rubble after five days. She was in a stroller with a milk bottle between her lips and the rubble collapsed on her parents. One-and-a-half-year-old Ahmet Erbay spent 40 hours under rubble in Gaziantep.

There are now 100 such babies in the hospital in Adana, babies whose parents are untraceable and whose names no one knows. They are among the 400 babies who were tracked down in the rubble.

The words of Yagmur, a five-year-old girl, moved everyone. When she was pulled out from the rubble 48 hours after the quake in Kahramanmaraş, she said to her waiting father: "I am cold, father, my hands are all white." She was stuck in the rubble and spent 36 hours in sub-



TURKIYE (115)
2,60,000
7.5



CHINA (1976)
2,42,769
7.5



AZERBAIJAN (1139)
2,30,000
Unknown

Strongest earthquakes in Türkiye since 1999

Türkiye is in one of the world's most active earthquake zones. The magnitude 7.8 quake that struck the country's south-eastern region on February 6 is the most powerful since 1999.

FEB 2023 1 KAHRAMANMARAS Death toll: 1000+ Magnitude: 7.8	AUG 1999 2 ISTANBUL Death toll: 17,500 Magnitude: 7.6	NOV 1999 3 DUZCE Death toll: 845 Magnitude: 7.2
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OCT 2011 4 VAN Death toll: 644 Magnitude: 7.2	OCT 2020 5 IZMIR Death toll: 117 Magnitude: 7.0	JAN 2020 6 ELAZIG Death toll: 41 Magnitude: 6.8
MAY 2003 7 BINGOL Death toll: 167 Magnitude: 6.4	MARCH 2010 8 ELAZIG Death toll: 42 Magnitude: 6.1	SOURCE: AL JAZEERA

zero temperatures. Firefighters who had travelled from Kocaeli province in the north-west had tracked her down using infrared sensors.

In Adiyaman, a Pakistani rescue team had almost given up on the rescue operation after 152 hours of desperate searching. As they walked away, they heard the faint voice of a person reciting prayers. They resumed the operation, and several hours later they pulled out a 15-year-old boy. His prayers were answered.

About 150 km away, in Gaziantep, an Indian team rescued a six-year-old boy named Beren from the rubble. Elsewhere in the city, they put smiles on the faces of the waiting parents of 8-year-old Miray Kartas when they pulled him after he had spent four days in the debris in freezing temperatures and without water and food.

A 90-member Indian medical team set up a hospital in a building near the port of Iskenderun in Hatay province. Indian teams had been deployed to 29 sites at the time of this writing and had recovered 29 bodies and rescued two people.

While search teams from nearly 90 countries were on

RELATIVES WAIT around a fire for news from rescue teams searching for three of their family members thought to be alive, on February 15 in Hatay.



CHRIS MCGRATH/BETTY IMAGES



CHRIS MCGRATH/BETTY IMAGES

DESPAIR AMIDST a pile of rubble on February 15, in Hatay, Türkiye.

the ground, experts said the likelihood of finding survivors was diminishing because the damage was spread over a large area, isolated in part by the ongoing conflict in Syria, and the number of rescue teams was still too small. In addition, it took a while for foreign rescue teams to arrive on the scene because of a lack of translators. Many of them were stuck at Adana airport until their embassies organised translators.

According to Yunus Sezer, chairman of the Agency for Disaster Management (AFAD), rescue operations after an earthquake usually stop after 72 days because it is assumed no one can survive beyond that period under the rubble. "But even after 10 days, we are recovering people alive, even small children who are barely a few months old," he said. This has stopped them from using heavy machinery to move the rubble. At one place, Turkish miners, along with a Spanish team, constructed a tunnel to reach beneath the rubble, where heat signatures indicated the presence of a family of three: a grandmother, a mother, and a baby.

The equipment that US Marines use to bust hideouts in wars is being used in rescue operations as this equipment traces heat signatures and records heartbeats from behind concrete walls from a distance of 50 metres.

The south-eastern part of Türkiye along the border with Syria and Iraq is known for the earliest human settlements, making it a popular destination for anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists. Jews, Christians, and Muslims revere the city of Urfa, located in the heavily affected province of Sanliurfa, known as the "City of Prophets". Both the Bible and the Quran state that the prophet Abraham was born and lived here before emigrating to Canaan (now Palestine). The Old Testament prophets Jethro, Job, Elijah, and Abraham all lived in this city. The region was also home to the prophet Moses, who worked as a shepherd in the region for seven years before returning to Egypt.

BUILDING LAW

Although Türkiye has a very strict building code and the authorities have not issued permits for the construction of single houses in urban areas since the 1980s, it is believed that municipalities in the affected regions have relaxed regulations in recent years for political reasons. According to the code, AFAD must approve construction after the building is completed. Once it is 10 years old, AFAD teams inspect the building's strength every year. Almost all buildings in the country are insured. Without this insurance, it is not possible to get utility connections



* Turkey's Anatolian plate is among the most seismically active regions

SOURCE: GRAPHIC NEWS

such as electricity, gas, or energy. When a building is declared unsafe, residents receive a notification. The local government then ensures that the building is demolished and rebuilt free of charge. The associated costs are covered by insurance companies.

Since 1999, building owners have also had to pay an “earthquake tax”, which was introduced after a massive earthquake that year destroyed much of north-western Türkiye and killed 17,400 people. The revenue, currently estimated at 88 billion liras (\$4.6 billion), is earmarked for disaster prevention and the development of emergency services.

Most municipal governments in the affected areas belong to political parties in opposition to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party, officially abbreviated as AK.

CONTRACTORS ON THE RUN

Survivors are berating contractors, while others are directing their anger at the Central and local governments. The Ministry of Justice has announced plans to establish an earthquake crimes investigation bureau to investigate contractors, architects, and others responsible for the construction work. So far, more than 100 contractors have been arrested in Türkiye and abroad, including one who was detained in Northern Cyprus and extradited, while another was arrested at Istanbul airport before his flight to Montenegro.

The quake comes at a time when Erdogan is waging his most difficult political battle yet against a resurgent opposition. He had already announced May 14 as the date for presidential and parliamentary elections, a month before his term ends.

SYRIA IGNORED

While international organisations focus on the damage in Türkiye, Abdulkarim Ekzayez, who studies healthcare in conflict zones, complained that Syrian casualties were being overlooked.

The war between the Syrian government and the opposition, and between Türkiye and Kurdish fighters, has already devastated civilian infrastructure in the region. In the absence of government authority, people

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Earth’s moving plates

Tectonic plates and positions of convergent (i.e. approaching) plate boundaries



Sources: US Geological Survey, US National Park Service

there rely heavily on cross-border aid from Türkiye, Ekzayez said.

Staff on the ground told *Frontline* that the quake disrupted the only international aid corridor from Türkiye to Syria, worsening an already dire humanitarian situation. “It’s chaos,” said Amany Qaddour, regional director of Syria Relief and Development. “We cannot rely on anything coming across the border right now.”

The UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported that some of the people affected by the earthquake were living in meagre shelters, tents, and partially destroyed buildings. “After 12 years of civil war, large parts of the infrastructure have been destroyed anyway and healthcare is not assured,” said the German aid organisation Aktion gegen den Hunger. The Bab al-Hawa border crossing is the only lifeline for millions of people in north-western Syria who live in areas not controlled by the Syrian government. Normally, more than 1,000 truckloads of aid pass through the border crossing every month.

ATTEMPTS AT CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Evidence shows that natural disasters are often an opportune time to resolve conflicts, as they increase the likelihood of ceasefires and talks. Signs of rapprochement are visible as the Greek rescue team was the first to reach Adana due to proximity. Despite political tensions with Türkiye, Greece sent its Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias to monitor the operations. The borders with Armenia were opened for the first time in 30 years. Türkiye helped its ally Azerbaijan in the war against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Receiving Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu said this rapprochement will help revive the historic Silk Road and restore ties.

It remains to be seen whether this disaster can lead to reconciliation between the Syrian government of Bashar Hafez al-Assad and Türkiye, which has supported the political and armed opposition to Damascus for more than a decade. More than four million Syrian refugees are camped in various parts of Türkiye, waiting for peace to return to their homeland. □

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