

# Could the Aftermath of Catastrophe be Less Annihilating?

## Examining the Severity of Earthquakes in Line with Various Mitigation Strategies in Turkey

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**Abstract:-** The paper examines the severity of earthquakes in Turkey along with different timelines and numerous policies that were made to combat them. It lays special emphasis on the implementation of earthquake tax introduced in 1999 after the Kocaeli earthquake and the controversies surrounding it. At the time when Turkey was hit by a catastrophic magnitude of 7.4 and thousands were killed the Turkish army along with numerous foreign NGOs played a major role in providing immediate support in contrast to the present scenario where due to government constraints both of the institutions couldn't be mobilized with immediate effect. It also brings in the discussion about the negligence from the administrative side in construction laws and how it has now left millions of Turkish people homeless while briefly touching upon different construction strategies implemented by Japan.

**Keywords:-** Turkey; Syria; Earthquake; Taxing; Policies; Aid; Humanity; Administration.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Turkey and parts of north-west Syria on 6th Feb 2023 experienced a fatal earthquake of 7.8 magnitude that killed nearly 3,400 people right away and the toll has crossed 43,556 as of 25th Feb 2023, WHO has further warned about digits to increase as much as eight times. The reports conveyed by the seismologist revealed that it took almost 2 minutes for the shaking to stop. The second quake hit after 12 hours with a 7.5 magnitude along with numerous aftershocks. The second earthquake had its epicenter around the Elbistan district of Kahramanmaraş province. The demolition of about 33,143 buildings in and around Turkey was confirmed by the Turkish government.

The earthquake came with the bells ringing years ago, the fact that it was ignored and is now replaced with cries from underneath is very traumatizing for humanity. It is neither the first time Turkey has gone through something so terrible nor is it the first time the international community has criticized the Turkish government for failing to take the required steps to lessen the severity of the disaster. The regime will have to

answer eventually about where the money collected for such destruction went and how the NGOs that played crucial roles in earlier quakes were systematically taken down by implying taxes and accusing them of being anti-national elements. Besides all of this, another fact that came out to the world is that if older structures had been modified to better resistance and the construction policies that were implemented were adhered to strictly the crackdown of structures would have been a little less and mankind would have suffered a little less.

### II. HISTORY OF EARTHQUAKES

Turkey has had a history of such catastrophic wars since its inception. It is a seismically active nation since it is predominantly positioned on the Anatolian Plate, a little wedge-shaped tectonic plate that is being forced westward when the Arabian Plate to the east collides with the Eurasian Plate. Thousands of people lose their lives each time but the fact that we see no improvement in infrastructure or in precautionary policies is problematic for the population not only socially but also for economic growth and development. The soil of Turkey has witnessed many quakes but the major ones that shook the nation were in 1999, 2011, 2020, 2023. The Kocaeli earthquake that occurred in 1999 killed over 17,000 people and left almost 250,000 homeless, the earthquake occurred in the nation's most industrialized and heavily inhabited urban areas, impacting the whole functioning of the country. A fire also broke out but that was only contained after three to four days. All of this served to highlight the disaster management organizations' defectiveness once more. The other tectonic movements that Turkey witnessed had the same devastating impact on the Turkish economy and people. The recent Kahramanmaraş earthquake that trembled both Turkey and Syria has surpassed the death toll of the country's most devastating quake making it one of the deadliest catastrophes in the world.

### III. PRECAUTIONARY POLICIES

Many strategic policies like the government's earthquake reconstruction program, compulsory earthquake insurance system and World bank comprehensive program were implemented for restoration of lives and to meet with the

aftereffects and to avoid such a situation in future. The answer to the question of how far it was actually implemented is in front of us, the failure to effectively finish the redevelopment project on time is one of the key causes for a misfortune that the world is now witnessing. After a fatal earthquake in 1999, the state implemented stricter construction regulations, although they were not really obeyed. The government introduced new taxes to recover from economic losses incurred by earthquakes, it included additional income, corporate, property, motor vehicle, transaction and special communication tax. The reported amount to be collected through these taxes in the last two decades is around 88,298TL billion. The special communication tax is a permanent, indirect tax that is acquired through the communication service being utilized. In order to fund general budget expenses, the taxes that have been collected are added to the general budget revenues. The allegations regarding funds being used in building highways and other vote pleasing projects have been raised on the current administration.

One of the many strategies implemented by the Turkish administration that very evidently had the potential to exacerbate the devastation after the 2011 earthquake was the 2018 zoning amnesty laws that gave license to buildings built before 2017, it abruptly provided licensing to illegal buildings for a fee without considering the fatal consequences it might have. The fact that the structures built before did not adhere to the building codes but got the license just by paying a fee to the government is now being questioned by the administration itself. Ironically, the government is now bringing in investigations on different builders and companies for illegal constructions while in the first place it was the administration that gave license to them for a small emolument. It goes beyond compromises done by builders and contractors or just the use of inferior materials. Inspectors, municipal, and state authorities may have also granted permits when they shouldn't have, or they might have simply turned a blind eye. The irresponsible behavior and leniency by local institutions actually led to the failure of such programs.

The government is now expecting all kinds of funds from civic institutions and foreign NGOs, the very groups that the administration weakened over time by introducing laws that increased government control over civil society, limiting NGOs access to funding, and forcing many of them to shut down. The fact that all the non-governmental organizations that are not working in line with the current government's ideology are being shut down on fabricated terrorism charges is just against the whole idea of presidential democracy in the region. Almost 375 NGOs and many international aid providing agencies including the Italian-based Coordination of the Organizations for Voluntary Service, the UK-based International NGO Safety Organization, Denmark's DanChurch Aid, and the U.S.-based Mercy Corps and as many as 19 trade unions, associations have been cracked down by the Turkish administration accounting to various domestic political and economic reasons. But then again the factors that led to such restrictive government

protocols including, the ferocious coup attempt in 2016 against the current president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's cabinet and various extremist attacks has actually affected much of Turkey's foreign and domestic policy. However, the administration cannot use the above mentioned reasons to justify its practice of targeting any dissident voice and ignore the fact that the regular people, not them, are the ones who have to deal with the repercussions of all of this. Moreover, the government's protocol of disabling the military to act without its instructions as part of a significant restructuring of the military, closing of academies and placing of the armed forces under the authority of the defense minister slowed down the process of mobilizing aid because of which the root areas are not receiving even the basic survival kits.

Even though Turkey's disaster management unit (AFAD) has trained personnel and the number of volunteers has increased significantly over years it still needs to develop more coordination with different NGOs and military personnel, following Monday's earthquake, it became blatantly obvious that AFAD is unable to organize the distribution of humanitarian supplies to the victims and perform efficient search and rescue operations all on its own. In 2009, Turkey's system for disaster management and coordination underwent changes that assigned coordination and legal authority during crises and catastrophes to a single government body. Most generals and admirals who could have taken the initiative during such times, were actually led during the coup attempt and were arrested or retired on spurious coup or terrorist accusations. The majority of the staff officers who contributed to the country's strategic thinking were dismissed. The malfunction under these circumstances was unavoidable. The problem is colossal to be single handedly operated by one disaster management unit. The pace at which the aid is reaching the people is inefficacious. Even though it is not the right time to talk about the accountability of the government, seeing the repercussions the country is facing each time it is high time that this issue is taken into consideration by powerful nations and organizations for the sake of humanity and not just politics.

#### IV. INTERNATIONAL AID AND LESSONS

Despite the fact that global powers are racing to aid the victims in the countries, the aid reaching Turkey is just crossing the bare minimum level. Interestingly, Turkey's humanitarian diplomacy in international affairs has opened doors for access as well as opportunities to strengthen and solidify partnerships, forging new political alliances as well as strengthening the old ones. Turkey's influence seems to be highlighted by the response to the earthquake from a range of countries who are already suffering from their own challenges. All African nations have made an effort to emphasize their strong ties to Turkey by sending in aid, regardless of resource availability and the nature of their relationships with the government. This is undoubtedly the consequence of a foreign strategy that increased Turkish presence and exposure on the global chessboard. Several impressive displays of solidarity emerged

from other countries, including Armenia that does not have formal diplomatic relations with Turkey, Greece stood as yet another neighbor that quickly responded to the crisis despite ongoing hostilities between Turkey and Greece over Aegean Sea territorial claims, China also won Turkish hearts by sending 467 rescuers and cutting-edge equipment, despite the fact that its handling of the Uyghur population has frequently soured bilateral relations. In addition, Finland and Sweden, whose applications for NATO membership are being rebuffed by Turkey, as well as NATO allies France and the United States, who have often differed with Erdogan, offered strong support.

Despite this, the tragedy did not lead to any loosening of Turkey's stance against Syria, whose northern territories, including Turkish-controlled Afrin, also experienced widespread death and destruction as a result of the earthquakes. This perspective implies that Turkish tolerance towards Syria has not been brought about by the sense of shared suffering. The condition is so dreadful in Syria that currently, aid is dependent on civic activities led by the local people, who themselves need help and support. People from the least devastated areas are assisting those in the most afflicted ones. The pace at which the aid is reaching to the people in both the nations is inefficacious, the volume of the requirements is enormous and major donating nations are already overburdened by other global challenges so, it is quite possible that no matter how hard humanitarian donors and organizations strive, the aid would be inadequate.

What lies ahead for Turkey is to properly formulate strategies and policies to combat these catastrophic wars and even learn from countries like Japan, Indonesia that are situated along the Pacific ring of fire which makes them prone to natural disaster but are well equipped and prepared for any future disturbances. In Turkey, structures that were not built in accordance with earthquake design were particularly susceptible. The major reason pointing to such massive destruction was the instability of buildings due to non durable materials used in Turkey that caused wreckage, in contrast to nations like Japan where material used in infrastructures is more sustainable and feasible. The construction standards in Japan, where earthquakes occur far more frequently than they do in Turkey, have traditionally been much stricter on specific issues like how much a structure may shake during an earthquake. Following the Kobe earthquake in 1995, which left over 6,000 people dead and 26,000 wounded, Japan subsequently committed a substantial amount of money on new structural protection research as well as upgrading the nation's older and more susceptible structures. Japan has invested enormous sums of money in creating the most cutting-edge technologies available to combat earthquakes and tsunamis. In the case of Turkey however, seismic regulations govern construction in areas close to fault lines. It was very clearly stated that the construction of buildings in seismic zones must adhere to Turkish Standards and the "General Technical Specification" of the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement in terms of both labor and materials. It was not at all adhered to by construction

companies nor was it cross checked by the administration. Another major lesson to be learnt is about the transparency and mutual cooperation among different levels of government that was evidently missing in Turkey's case. The untransparent, unregulated system that arose after a coup attempt in 2019 paved the way for a privatized system that is seriously affecting the country now. More emphasis needs to be given to planning and spending on research and development which is a key factor for any nation to avoid negative consequences of unforeseen misfortunes. However, because this ultimately requires funding and political will, it is exceedingly challenging in a nation with a lot of political unrest.

## V. CONCLUSION

Turkey is currently seeing the systemic results of political profiteering. Such a tragic and dangerous tragedy will have long-lasting impacts that will necessitate major efforts from civic groups and the government. The government will ultimately have to respond to the retribution by communities as well as foreign organizations given the way corruption and flaws are emerging in Turkey. The earthquakes have sparked a surge in domestic and international support to assist with rescue and recovery operations. Nevertheless, soon focus will need to be turned to the restoration of a region that is home to more than 13 million people and accounts for 9% of exports and over 10% of Turkey's GDP. The new calamity prompts an urgent appeal for national action as Turkey finds itself at a crossroads once more. Rebuilding the same type of subpar housing and infrastructure as before will not reduce the likelihood of catastrophes in the future. Today's engineers, economists, policy analysts, and leaders in Turkey have the option to take a risk and continue an ongoing experiment to build a society that acknowledges earthquakes as a persistent hazard that can be controlled.

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