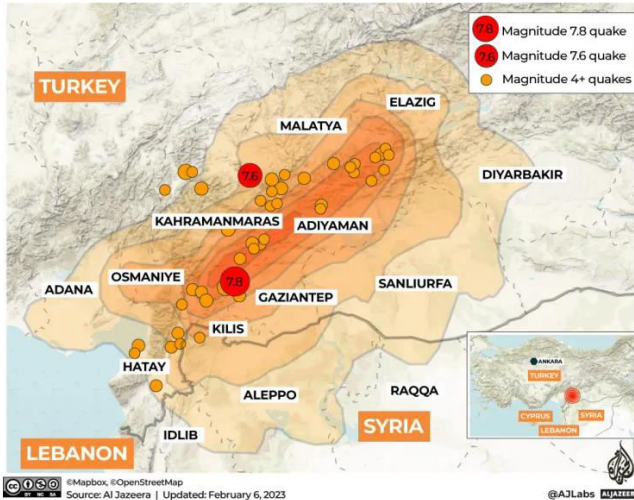


12/2/2023

KLA Statement on the Earthquakes in Southeast Turkey and Northwest Syria

Pre-dawn Monday, February 6, 2023, at least 25 million people woke to everything around them shaking violently. An earthquake, with a magnitude of 7.8, hit southeast Turkey from Adana to Diyarbakir, some 450 kilometres apart, and south to Idlib and Aleppo (including Afrin) in Syria, its epicentre near Gaziantep, a Kurdish-majority town north of the border. Nine hours later another earthquake near equal in magnitude hit the same area with over a thousand aftershocks of lesser magnitudes to follow. So far, 10,000 buildings have collapsed.



This man held his daughter's hand for the last 14 hours of her life.

Those who could, left their buildings. Some escaped in cars to be stuck in traffic jams. Many did not leave, especially those with loved ones under the rubble. People started digging with their hands. When a baby or child was extracted, the waiting crowd surged with joy. By nightfall, survivors gathered around fires in the street, in the rain, sleet and snow, in temperatures below zero. Most no longer had a home to return to. By the second day no help had arrived, either from Turkey's emergency services or the army. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had delayed the army's deployment. Individuals and community groups became the rescuers.

As time passes, the chances of finding survivors diminishes. In seven days, the death toll in Turkey and Syria climbed from 5,000 to 16,000 to 28,000. It's still climbing. The number injured has surpassed [100,000](#).

Many earthquake-hit areas in Turkey have large Kurdish populations. In Opposition-held and Turkey occupied northwest Syria, the population is mixed Arab, Kurdish, Turkman and Assyrians. On both sides of the border, hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people from Syria's civil war and Turkey's war on Kurds live in tents or poorly constructed 'box' homes. Then there are the apartment blocks built after Erdogan came to power on the back of promising better building codes following the 1999 earthquake. They did not pass the test. Despite the mix of ethnicities, it would appear the majority of earthquake victims could be Kurds and displaced Syrian Arabs. Not that the media reflects this.

Apart the human disaster, two ancient cities in Turkey and one in Syria have suffered extensive damage: Antakya (an early Christian centre called Antioch), Sanliurfa/Urfa (home to Gobekli Tepe, a temple built 7,000 years before the pyramids), and the 6,000-year-old, war torn city of Aleppo. Also damaged are Gaziantep's ancient castle and Diyarbakir's millennial old walls.



Shockingly, on February 7, there were multiple reports that Turkish Forces shelled the earthquake-impacted region of Til Rifat in northern Aleppo, where more than 100,000 Kurds displaced by Turkey's invasion and occupation of Afrin reside. A Turkish state media outlet confirmed the attack. On February 12, Turkish forces and their Syrian militia proxies again attacked, this time targeting villages and the highway near Ain Issa in the area administered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). There are also many horrifying unconfirmed Tweets. On February 11-12 people claimed special Turkish 'rescue' teams were flying Kurdish babies and children to Istanbul and

Ankara to be adopted by Turkish families. A Canadian parliamentarian claimed Turkey's Emergency notifications are being broadcasts in seven languages – but not Kurdish. **We call on the Australian Government to push for independent investigations into these appalling facts and allegations.**

By Wednesday, the people of the earthquake affected areas of Turkey – Turks, Kurds, and Arabs alike - were angry, highly critical of the lack of support they were receiving from the government. Erdogan responded to this criticism by saying journalists were fanning discontent and hostility. Nine were detained for spreading misinformation. In Turkey, people go to prison for less. The government shut down the internet for some hours and Elon Musk offered to install Starlink for free given the internet was vital for co-ordinating civilian self-help groups. Erdogan rejected Musk's offer.

By Thursday international aid had still not arrived in northwest Syria. In northern Idlib, earthquake damage to Al-Taloul Dam submerged surrounding villages. President Assad was being criticised for a lack of effort, even in regime-controlled areas. He announced that all aid had to go through the government. Observers know this means huge amounts could be siphoned off, especially if being transported to the northwest. In Assad's view, the area is populated by 'terrorists' mostly under Turkey's control.

Three regions and 60 countries were quick to offer help, including those Erdogan was or is waging a war in, such as the AANES, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Armenia, and those he threatens, such as Greece, Sweden, and Cyprus. Even the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) announced a unilateral ceasefire inside Turkey.

Others, like Australia (providing AUD\$10 million in aid), the US (providing USD\$85 million in aid and sanction relief) and Israel, are sending large well-equipped teams and supplies. Most

resources are funnelled through the UN. The UN controls where the teams are sent. That is small comfort for Kurds, whose concerns can be pushed aside in the name of appeasing the Arab majority in Syria and the Turkish government in Turkey. Still, Syria is worse off. By Friday February 10, five lines of cars, banked up for miles were returning the bodies of Syrian refugees to their homeland. Only two aid convoys had made it through. Convoys from Iraqi Kurdistan and the AANES to Opposition held areas were being blocked by Turkey's Syrian proxies. A Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF) convoy from Iraqi Kurdistan finally arrived in Jinderes on February 12, having come via Turkey and the Bab al-Salama border crossing. It was the first international aid delivery to Jinderes in the district of Afrin.



Jinderes, Afrin (Aleppo, Syria)

Erdogan's responses to the offers have been mixed. He rejected offers from the Republic of Cyprus, the Turkish Opposition, and the Commander in Chief of the Kurd-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Mazloum Abdi Kobani. For Erdogan, politics is more important than human life.

Many in Turkey, including Erdogan's political Opposition argue that Turkey's one-man rule is responsible for the slow and disorganised response, and the corruption and cronyism leading to poorly constructed buildings. Despite Erdogan's unlimited power, he pushed a State of Emergency bill through parliament covering 10 earthquake affected provinces. Most people think this is for political reasons given the looming presidential and national elections. A lot is at stake – 2023 is the 100-year anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne that established the modern nation state of Turkey and abolished the proposed nation state of Kurdistan.

In the lead up to the election Turkey's treasury blocked finances for the election campaign of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). Turkey's Constitutional Court will decide whether to entirely shut down HDP before the elections. HDP has proved too successful. HDP's charismatic two times presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas, has been in prison since November 2016.

Erdogan cannot afford to lose the upcoming election. If he does, he is likely to be put on trial for corruption, dealing with ISIS, and other nefarious activities. Erdogan plays dirty. He probably won't lose, although this earthquake could change everything. Yet the Kemalist-leaning Opposition Alliance offers no solutions for Turkey's Kurds, which are about 25 percent of the



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population. Pre-election, the alliance has been unwilling to co-ordinate with the HDP; their extensive manifesto did not raise Kurdish issues; and among them, the ultra-nationalist leader of the IYI (Good) Party, Meral Aksener, claims she would not sit at the same table with HDP. Such are the challenges facing Kurds in Turkey who want to rely on democratic processes to achieve basic human, cultural and political rights.

KLA is heartened by the Australian Government's immediate humanitarian response to help earthquake victims. **Care must be taken so those most in need receive help, whatever their ethnicity. We ask the Australian Government to push for independent investigations into why the Turkish state has been so inadequate in its disaster response and building codes. Political leaders, bureaucracies, and construction companies must be held to account. But most of all, considering Turkey will probably need international help to rebuild, we ask the Australian Government to advocate that this be conditional on the Turkish state stopping all wars of aggression against Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, in which whole communities are collateral damage, and for Turkey to embark on genuine peace negotiations that will benefit all stakeholders. This 40-year war must stop. Out of this disaster, let there be peace.**

Similarly, rebuilding Syria must be dependent on Assad sincerely negotiating and implementing a new constitution or being removed if he is content to preside over a collapsed state.

Kurdish issues are international in scope and implication yet tend to fall between desks in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). People focused on Turkey can be ill informed of Turkey's war on PKK in northern Syria and Iraq (Sinjar, Kirkuk, Nineveh, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq). **KLA formally requests the Australian Government to appoint a non-partisan Kurdish expert in DFAT to keep the relevant desks informed.**

In the meantime, KLA will continue working on establishing some sort of informal Parliamentary Friends of Kurds so decision makers are better informed, given this region lurches from one war and catastrophe to another, all of which have required international responses to which the Australian Government has contributed. Understanding the diverse people, cultures and politics of the region can only improve decisions, processes, and actions.

Yours Sincerely,

Hazhar Siyan
KLA Co-Chair & President

Dr Gina Lennox
KLA Co-Chair & Public Officer

Please consider donating to
www.heyvasor.com (Kurdish Red Crescent)
Earthquake Appeal

