

WHO says death toll from Turkey earthquake could increase eight-fold

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Geneva, February 7 (RHC)-- The death toll from a strong earthquake in south-eastern Turkey, near Syria's border, could rise eight-fold, the World Health Organization has warned. The toll, which currently stands at more than 3,400 people, has increased rapidly since the first earthquake struck early on Monday morning. About 12 hours later, a second powerful tremor hit further north.

Rescuers have been combing through mountains of rubble in freezing and snowy conditions to find survivors. Countries around the world are sending support to help the rescue efforts, including specialist teams, sniffer dogs and equipment.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the 7.8 magnitude tremor struck at 04:17 local time (01:17 GMT) at a depth of 17.9km (11 miles) near the city of Gaziantep. Seismologists said the first quake was one of the largest ever recorded in Turkey. Survivors said it took two minutes for the shaking to stop.

The second quake - triggered by the first - had a magnitude of 7.5, and its epicentre was in the Elbistan district of Kahramanmaras province. Many aftershocks are still being felt across the region.

The number of dead and injured from both Turkey and Syria has increased rapidly throughout Monday. The WHO has warned that those numbers are likely to increase as much as eight times, as rescuers find more victims in the rubble.

Thousands of buildings across both the countries have collapsed, and several videos show the moment they fell, as onlookers ran for cover. Many buildings that were as large as 12 storeys high are now flattened, roads have been destroyed and there are huge mountains of rubble as far as the eye can see.

Among the buildings destroyed was Gaziantep Castle, an historic landmark that has stood for more than 2,000 years. The BBC's Middle East correspondent Anna Foster, reporting from the Turkish city of Osmaniye, near the epicentre, described a devastating scene. "It's absolutely pouring with rain which is hampering the rescue efforts. There is no power at all in the city tonight.

"We're still feeling regular after-shocks... and there are still concerns that there may be still more buildings to collapse," our correspondent said.

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