

*Turkey-Syria earthquake death toll tops 15,000 as rescue efforts challenged by access and sanctions*

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Damascus, February 9 (RHC)-- Rescue operations continued in Turkey and Syria, three days after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake jolted the two countries in the region's most powerful quake in over eight decades. Harrowing scenes have emerged from the affected areas as bodies are pulled from the wreckage and the death toll surpasses 15,000.

In Turkey's border province of Hatay, devastated residents say help took too long to arrive, as they take stock of the disaster. One resident, Halil Gencoglu, said: "We went to the city center. The situation is worse than here. It is worse. It is almost like a ghost city. We went back at least 50 years in time. Our lives are ruined. Our children are devastated. Our lives are lost. We lost our children, our parents. At least two to three people died from each home."

Some miraculous survivals are also being reported. In Syria, a baby born in the rubble was pulled to safety by her uncle and made it to a nearby hospital. Her mother did not survive.

Displaced survivors around Aleppo say they face freezing conditions amid shortages of heating oil, and some are too scared to remain indoors for fear of more tremors. Rescue efforts in Syria have been complicated by damage and displacement from 12 years of war and harsh sanctions. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent called on the European Union Tuesday to lift its sanctions to facilitate humanitarian aid reaching those who need it in government-controlled areas. The United States also maintains criminal sanctions on the government of Bashar al-Assad.

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