

Rescuers in Turkey find new survivors after 11 days



People queue for free food served amid the rubble following the deadly earthquake in Kahramanmaras, Turkey [Eloisa Lopez/Reuters]

Ankara, February 18 (RHC)-- Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu has updated the death toll in Turkey to 39,672, bringing the overall number of earthquake fatalities in both Turkey and Syria to 43,360. Friday's figure is certain to increase as search teams retrieve more bodies amid the devastation caused by the powerful magnitude-7.8 earthquake — the deadliest disaster in Turkey's modern history.

Even as the window for finding people alive shrank, rescuers removed a survivor from the rubble of a collapsed building in the district of Defne, in hard-hit Hatay province, more than 11 days after the powerful earthquake struck.

Hakan Yasino?lu, 45, spent 278 hours beneath the rubble, according to Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency. TV footage showed him being carried on a stretcher to an ambulance. Search teams working overnight also found a woman and two men alive in earthquake wreckage. The latest rescues came as crews began clearing debris in cities devastated by the earthquake.

Neslihan Kilic, a 29-year-old mother of two, was removed from the rubble of a building in Kahramanmaras, after being trapped for 258 hours, the private DHA news agency reported late Thursday.

In the city of Antakya, police rescue crews found a 12-year-old boy named Osman alive after retrieving 17 bodies from a collapsed building. "Just when our hopes were over, we reached our brother Osman at the 260th hour," police rescue team leader Okan Tosun told DHA.

An hour later, crews reached two men inside the debris of a collapsed hospital in Antakya. One of them, Mustafa Avci, used the mobile phone of a rescuer to call his brother and ask about family members. "Have they all survived? he asked. "Let me hear their voices."

Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay on Friday said rescue efforts continued at fewer than 200 sites in the region. A total of 143 trucks carrying aid from Turkey into northwest Syria have crossed the border since February 9, a United Nations official said.

Jens Laerke, spokesman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said the trucks are carrying a "multitude" of items from six UN agencies — including tents, mattresses, blankets, winter clothes, cholera testing kits, essential medicines, and food from the World Food Program. They crossed through the border gates of Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam, he said.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, said it was working closely with Turkey to determine the steps needed to rehabilitate infrastructure in the agricultural sector damaged by the quake, including irrigation systems, roads, markets and storage capacity.

"In Syria, rapid assessments by FAO of areas affected by the earthquakes suggest major disruption to crop and livestock production capacity, threatening immediate and longer-term food security," the Rome-based agency said in a statement.

The bodies of at least 1,522 Syrians have been brought back to Syria from Turkey for burial, an official at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based war monitor, reported that when the numbers from other, smaller crossings were tallied, the number of earthquake victims returned to Syria for burial was 1,745.

Syrian survivors have also begun crossing back from Turkey. Some 1,795 Syrians crossed from Turkey into Syria on Wednesday, the first day after Turkey agreed to allow Syrian refugees affected by the earthquake to return to their country temporarily without losing their protected status in Turkey, an official at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing said.

The decision allows holders of Turkish temporary protection cards residing in earthquake-damaged areas to cross into Syria without having to obtain a travel permit from Turkish authorities.

Normally, Turkey would consider Syrians holding protected status who crossed into Syria without a permit to have relinquished their status as asylum-seekers. They would be required to surrender their protection cards and banned from re-entering Turkey for five years.

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