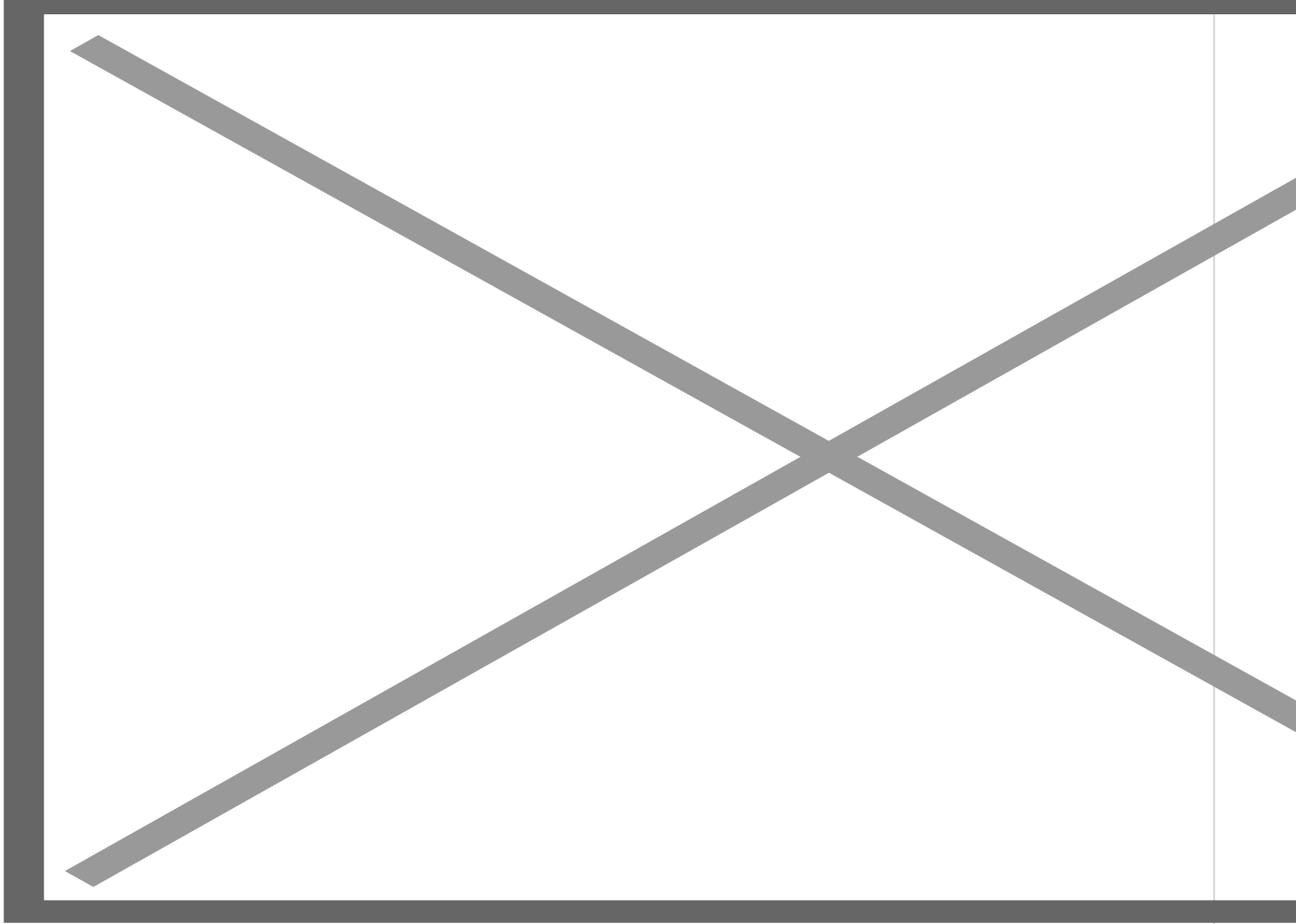


UN launches \$1 billion appeal for earthquake aid operations in Turkey

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United Nations, February 17 (RHC)-- The United Nations has appealed for more than \$1 billion in funds for the Turkish earthquake relief operation, just two days after launching a \$400 million appeal for Syrians.

UN aid chief Martin Griffiths, who visited Turkey last week, said on Thursday that the people have “experienced unspeakable heartache,” adding: “We must stand with them in their darkest hour and ensure they receive the support they need.”

The February 6 earthquake has so far killed at least 36,187 in southern Turkey, while authorities in neighbouring Syria have reported 5,800 deaths. Rescue efforts have continued in Turkey, but the number of people rescued daily has dwindled significantly.

A teenage girl was pulled alive from the rubble in the province of Kahramanmaraş on Thursday – more than 10 days after a devastating earthquake hit the region. But such rescues have become increasingly rare.

The 17-year-old was safely extracted from the ruins of a collapsed apartment block, broadcaster TRT Haber reported, 248 hours since the 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck in the dead of night on February 6.

For families still waiting to retrieve their lost relatives, there is growing anger over what they see as corrupt building practices and deeply flawed urban development that resulted in thousands of homes and businesses disintegrating.

Turkey has promised to investigate anyone suspected of responsibility for the collapse of buildings and has ordered the detention of more than 100 suspects, including developers.

Across the border in Syria, the earthquake slammed a region divided and devastated by 12 years of civil war. The Syrian government said the death toll in territory it controls is 1,414. More than 4,000 fatalities have been reported in the rebel-held northwest, but rescuers say nobody has been found alive there since February 9th.

The aid effort has been hampered by the conflict, and many people in the northwest feel abandoned as supplies almost invariably head to other parts of the sprawling disaster zone. Deliveries from Turkey were severed completely in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, when a route used by the United Nations was temporarily blocked. Earlier this week, days after the disaster, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad granted approval for two additional crossings to be opened.

As of Thursday, 119 UN trucks had gone through the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam border crossings between Turkey and Syria since the earthquake, a spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs told Reuters.

A convoy of 15 aid trucks from Qatar has reached Syria’s rebel-held town of Afrin, bringing desperately needed food, essential medicines and tents.

The potential economic impact of the earthquake in Turkey could result in a loss of up to one percent of the country’s gross domestic product this year, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) said in a report published on Thursday.

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