

Earthquake death toll surpasses 46,000 in Syria and Turkey

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A woman waits while search tams dig through the rubble of a collapsed building in the aftermath of the deadly earthquake in Hatay, Turkey, February 18, 2023 [Eloisa Lopez/Reuters]

Ankara, February 18 (RHC)-- Twelve days after a devastating earthquake hit Turkey and Syria, more than 46,000 people have died and more than 84,000 buildings have either been severely damaged, need urgent demolition, or collapsed, according to officials.

As Turkey attempts to manage its worst modern disaster, concerns are growing over the victims of the tragedy in Syria, with the World Food Programme (WFP) pressuring authorities in the northwest to stop blocking access to the area as it seeks to help hundreds of thousands of people ravaged by earthquakes.

Workers from Kyrgyzstan on Saturday tried to save a Syrian family of five from the rubble of a building in Antakya city in southern Turkey. Three people, including a child, were rescued alive. The mother and father survived but the child died later of dehydration, the rescue team said. One older sister and a twin did not make it.

Meanwhile, an infant child born in northern Syria during the earthquake has been reunited with her aunt and uncle, after her parents and siblings died in the disaster. Footage circulating widely on social media after the quake showed a rescuer scrambling down a hill of rubble carrying a tiny dust-covered baby.

The newborn was later identified as the child of Abdallah and Afraa Mleihan, who died in the earthquake along with their other children in the rebel-held town of Jandaris in Syria's Aleppo province.

On Saturday, her paternal aunt Hala and uncle by marriage Khalil Al-Sawadi finally picked up their niece – whom they named Afraa, after her deceased mother.

The head of the World Food Program (WFP) has urged authorities in northwestern Syria to stop blocking access to the area as it seeks to help hundreds of thousands of people ravaged by earthquakes. WFP Director David Beasley has said the agency was running out of supplies there and called for more border crossings to be opened from Turkey.

"The problems we are running into [are with] the cross-line operations into northwest Syria where the northwestern Syrian authorities are not giving us the access we need," said Beasley on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

In Syria, already shattered by more than a decade of civil war, the bulk of fatalities have been in the northwest. The area is controlled by fighters at war with forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad which has complicated efforts to get aid to people.

Medics and experts have voiced concerns about the possible spread of infection in the areas where tens of thousands of buildings collapsed last week, leaving sanitation infrastructure damaged. Turkish health minister Fahrettin Koca said on Saturday that although there had been a rise in intestinal and upper respiratory infections, the numbers did not pose a serious threat to public health.

"Our priority now is to fight against the conditions that can threaten public health and to prevent infectious diseases," Koca told a news conference in southern Hatay province. Aid organisations say the survivors will need help for months to come with so much crucial infrastructure destroyed.

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