

Turkish Tragedy

A Devastating Earthquake Shakes the Land, People and Government of Turkey

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

The devastating earthquake that hit Turkey's Marmara region in August killed almost 20,000 people, left more than 27,000 people injured and hundreds of thousands homeless. The epicenter of the 7.4 magnitude earthquake was near Izmit, an industrial city about 104 km (60 miles) east of Istanbul.

The enormity of the disaster left Turks and people around the world shocked. While the international community responded quickly to help, the failure of Turkish authorities to respond effectively to the disaster caused anger and disappointment both inside and outside Turkey. Angered earthquake victims criticized the government's failure to prevent contractors from building with cheap materials, in defiance of safety codes designed to make homes earthquake proof and for its delayed response to rescue people trapped under mountains of rubble. As one Turkish minister remarked, the earthquake was "a declaration of bankruptcy for the Turkish political and administrative system."

Turkish Health Minister Osman Durmus' notorious decision to reject rescue teams and aid from Armenia, Greece, and Romania and his statement that US hospital ships sent to Turkey were not necessary, became a prime target of public rage. This compounded the government's troubles and angered many international aid teams.

Durmus, a member of the far-right Nationalist Action Party in the government of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, was criticized by the Council of Ministers and parliamentary groups. Public reaction to his statements was equally forceful, calling for his resignation. However, in contrast to Durmus, the Turkish people continued to express their gratitude to international and national rescue teams.

European countries sent nearly 2,000 rescue and medical workers and a large contingent of rescue teams and military personnel reached the disaster zone within days from the US and a host of other countries.

Immediately after the earthquake, Armenia offered to fly in 100



Collapsed homes in Bahcecik (Bardizag).

professional rescuers and 10 truckloads of equipment. However, Turkish diplomatic snafus and bureaucracy left a plane-load of supplies waiting at Yerevan's airport.

"The health minister can only be described as a retarded racist," said a Turkish diplomat, who affirmed that the Turkish Foreign Ministry had forwarded Armenia's assistance offer to the government's crisis management center. From Australia to Canada, Turkey's rejection of aid was criticized in newspapers around the world, especially given the enormity of the human tragedy.

Finally, 11 days after the disaster, Armenia's aid reached Istanbul after Ankara gave clearance. Armenia's Department for Emergency Situations sent a cargo plane delivering \$10,000 of medicines, three diesel generators, and other first aid supplies. Five employees of the Department and a team of experts from the



An Armenian woman in Istanbul during a church service for the Turkish earthquake victims at the Cathedral of the Armenian Patriarchate.

National Service of Seismic Protection accompanied the airlift.

Within hours after the earthquake, Turkey's Armenian community, under the leadership of Patriarch Mesrob II of Istanbul and all Turkey, organized rescue teams—comprised of priests and youth—and sent them to the damaged areas to help the victims.

The Holy Savior Armenian Hospital's emergency unit was

filled to capacity. Most Armenian medical specialists were asked by the Turkish Health Ministry to serve in state hospitals, while the hospital continued to admit victims for treatment, free of charge. Also, in response to a request from the Istanbul Chamber of Medicine, the hospital dispatched \$6,000 worth of medical equipment and supplies to the earthquake zone.

The Patriarchate's courtyard, and the large front yards of the



Left: In Adapazari, the homeless queue to register for winterized tents.



Right: Patriarch Mesrob speaks with earthquake victims in Adapazari.

PHOTOS BY SEVAN APAYAN

Armenian churches in Ferikoy and Samatya were opened to the public to use the water supplies and other facilities available in the complexes. Food and tea was served to hundreds of people who were either homeless or feared returning home amid hundreds of aftershocks.

The earthquake also caused deep cracks on the third floor of the Patriarchal headquarters in the Kumpaki district. The bell tower, built in 1870, was damaged; two of the five stone-crosses decorating the dome of the sanctuary fell down damaging the roof of the ancient church's nave. Nine other Armenian churches in Istanbul and a number of Armenian schools were damaged, in addition to the building complex of the Armenian Hospital in Yedikule. During the aftershocks a large chunk of the upper wall on the facade of the Armenian Church of Saint John the Evangelist fell down. Further cracks developed in the walls and beams of the Armenian Church of the Holy Mother-of-God in Bakirkoy. The Patriarchate reported that numerous houses collapsed in Istanbul's Avcilar district where there is a thriving community of Armenians who had migrated to the city from Kastamonu and Sinop regions in the northern part of the country.

A team of engineers and architects has estimated that the cost of renovation of the Patriarchate and the churches will exceed \$1.2 million. However, the Patriarch has stated that at this stage their priority is providing relief assistance to the victims and securing the welfare of the affected people.

So far, three weeks after the earthquake, over two dozen Armenians have been killed in the earthquake.

"There are still thousands under the rubble in Izmit, Adapazari, Yalova and Cinarcik, where Armenians worked or lived," said a report from the Patriarchate. "How many of them fell victim to the earthquake is still an unanswered question. No information is yet available on the injured, since they could have been taken to any hospital in the Izmit gulf area," stated the report.

Patriarch Mesrob has been a leading force behind the immedi-

ate organization of relief work, despite an uneasy relationship with the government and extremist attitudes toward the Armenians from certain segments of Turkish society.

Indeed, in a touching move, the 43-year-old Patriarch adopted three Armenian orphans whose parents were killed in the earthquake—one of them a 12-year-old girl whose left leg was amputated. He assured them that they will be taken care of until they graduate from university. The Patriarch is also setting up an earthquake trauma clinic where children and young people can be treated for psychological and emotional problems.

Within days of the disaster, the Patriarch issued an encyclical expressing his sympathy to the families of the dead and giving spiritual encouragement to the injured and the homeless. He urged the Armenian communities in Turkey and around the world to contribute to the fundraising efforts and to extend a helping hand to the victims. The Patriarchate has already contributed \$7,000 to the aid campaign, despite its own severe financial crisis.

Weeks after the earthquake, new rescue teams came from abroad to continue searching through mountains of rubble for the missing. Father Zacheos Ohanian, a young priest, headed a volunteer team of 15 youths from the Armenian community of Istanbul to Cinarcik—a resort town not far from the epicenter of the earthquake. In the absence of public officials and relief teams in the town, Fr. Zacheos and his team, together with untrained rescue groups dug through the rubble with their bare hands looking for survivors. The priest said "he cannot forget the angelic face of the 2-month-old baby's deformed remains that he found under the debris. The corpse of the baby's young father was nearby and the mother was yet to be found." When asked whether the baby was Armenian, "Who cares, it's all the same," was Fr. Zacheos' response.

Other young Armenians joined AKUT, a local Turkish NGO specializing in relief work, and various rescue organizations which transported volunteers to the disaster zone. A group of Turkish and



Left: In Akmeshe (Armash), the mosque built two years ago in the place of the former Holy Cross Armenian Church lost its minaret. The former church used to be the center of worship for the once famous Armash monastery and theological school which has been heavily damaged (right).

Armenian professionals set up a portable kitchen in Izmit serving three free meals a day to 1,500 people.

Given the large scale of the disaster, Patriarch Mesrob invited and organized an ecumenical relief effort with the participation of all Christian churches in Turkey, including the Greek, Syrian, Roman Catholic, German Evangelical, Anglican, churches and a host of other religious organizations. The short- and long-term assistance is being coordinated by the newly created Churches of Turkey Disaster Relief Steering Committee (CDR), which has already dispatched hygiene kits, baby food and other emergency supplies to the disaster area.

On August 21, the Armenian and Greek Patriarchs of Istanbul paid a pastoral visit to Izmit with members of the ecumenical committee. "During the eight hour trip, the Patriarchs shared the pain of those who had lost their family members," wrote *Radikal* newspaper. The Patriarchs also discussed relief work with local government officials. An initial commitment was made to build 200 pre-fabricated units in a place to be designated by the local authorities.

During a second trip to the disaster zone, Patriarch Mesrob and members of the Steering Committee delivered 80 of the 200 tents ordered from Norway by the CDR to the earthquake zone. One foreign relief worker accompanying the Patriarch said, "It is impossible not to weep. We were able to share the frustration of government officials unable to shake loose from endless regulation and to celebrate the erection of the first tents.... The task is overwhelming."

The delegation also conducted a survey of the devastated areas to plan relief efforts accordingly. The World Council of Churches, the Middle East Council of Churches, the Vatican and other European churches have expressed readiness to provide financial aid.

Meanwhile, Armenian churches and organizations in the Diaspora have responded positively to Mesrob II's call for help. Church leaders in Ejmiatsin, Yerevan, Beirut, New York, Los

Angeles, Sydney and other cities have called upon their parishioners and benefactors to participate in relief efforts. Among the first to respond were the Armenian Missionary Association of America in New Jersey and the Armenian Relief Society in Boston with an initial contribution of \$5,000 each.

The Istanbul Armenian organizations in North America have mobilized fundraising efforts to help their compatriots in Turkey. Meeting under the auspices of the Diocese of the Armenian Church in New York, \$19,000 was sent to Turkey through the Fund for Armenian Relief, a Diocese-affiliated charity organization which has been helping Armenia since the 1988 earthquake there. In early October a benefit concert was organized by the Diocese at the St. Vartan Cathedral in New York, where former Istanbul-natives, renown violinists, sisters Ani and Ida Kavafian and pianist Sahar Arzruni performed. Patriarch Mesrob II presided over the concert and a fundraising event in Los Angeles organized by the Western Diocese. Meanwhile, the Lincy Foundation has announced that it will donate up \$600,000 in matching funds.

Currently, the Armenian Patriarchate has concentrated its relief efforts in three areas: General disaster relief to the earthquake zone; aid to children, primarily caring for orphans and providing psychological treatments; repair and renovation of damaged Armenian Church buildings.

As in the case of the earthquake in Armenia and elsewhere around the world, it will take years to restore shattered lives and reconstruct demolished homes. Large-scale human tragedies caused by nature do not know national boundaries. Physical and political structures come and go, but common sense, human care and spirit are the ultimate champions. While government officials will continue to pursue their political and diplomatic contests, the worst tragedy is forgetting the victims who will need assistance for years to come. ■