

TÜRKIYE STANDS READY TO OVERCOME THE "DISASTER OF THE CENTURY"

By Onur Erim, Chairman of Dragoman Strategies and former chief advisor to Ankara municipality

Twin devastating earthquakes rocked the Türkiye-Syrian border on the 6th of February. The first one, with a magnitude of 7.7, had its centre about 34 kilometres west of the city of Gaziantep. Nine hours later, a second, 7.6 magnitude earthquake, occurred 95 kilometres north-northwest from the first, in the Kahramanmaraş Province.

Followed by over 15,000 aftershocks, the earthquakes were catastrophic, causing widespread damage in southern Türkiye and northern Syria. An area of 110,000 km² was affected, roughly the size of Bulgaria. In the aftermath more than 12,000 buildings collapsed, over 50,000 people died and more than a million people were displaced. After a quick assessment of the vast damage, Türkiye sounded a level 4 alarm, calling for global assistance. The international community strongly responded with more than 90 countries sending search and rescue teams and nearly 10,000 personnel in the biggest search and rescue mission of all-time. While this act of global solidarity saved thousands of lives, much more help is needed for full recovery. The United Nations has estimated that the damage from the earthquakes, which have been called the "disaster of the century", is roughly 100 billion dollars.

Many countries answered Türkiye's call

Türkiye is not a rich country. But, it has always been a generous one. Whether sending aid to more than 150 countries during the COVID pandemic or its humanitarian assistance to countries like Syria, Libya, Yemen and Somalia, Türkiye has always extended a helping hand. It was important to see many countries stand next to Türkiye during its time of need. Despite the weight of this burden and the difficulty of this test, the Turkish state and people have shown a tremendous response to the disaster. Public institutions, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, sports clubs and the media passed this test with flying colors. But, when responding to a disaster of this magnitude, there comes a point where resources are stretched to the limit and international assistance is needed. It was at this moment that Türkiye's friends –including many European countries— answered Ankara's call.

Recently, I attended a "Solidarity to Overcome Disaster" Conference at the European Parliament, which aimed to improve cooperation between the European Union and Türkiye and strengthen solidarity. While Türkiye and the EU has had its ups and downs in the past, I was greatly pleased by the wide participation of European officials and experts and sincere approach I witnessed. The participation of Dr. Fahrettin Altun, the Director of Türkiye's Presidential Communications, also underlined that Türkiye was placing great on dialogue with its European allies. During Mr. Altun's keynote speech, he Highlighted the importance of solidarity and working together with the global community to identify The immediate humanitarian needs of earthquakes survivors and raise awareness regarding the scale of The disaster. With the EU Donor's Conference set for March 20th, this event and Director Altun's message was very timely.

As Türkiye has now moved on from the search and rescue mission towards the relief and recovery phase, I see two main conclusions of this one month period. Firstly, while the immediate response is vital, the work has merely just begun. For survivors, the most important thing now is the reconstruction of their homes as soon as possible, so, after healing from the physical trauma, they can start healing from the psychological trauma. It is as this point where Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's pledge to rebuild all homes with one year gives earthquake survivors hope.

The biggest rebuilding project in history

Türkiye will now embark on the biggest rebuilding project in human history. Currently the debris of collapsed buildings is being cleared and the initial steps towards rebuilding are already quickly underway. The Turkish Government is carefully planning the reconstruction to ensure that future earthquakes will never create this level of damage again. This disaster has also given new impetus to the government's urban transformation program, which in the past had received opposition and been slowed down. While these endeavors are tremendous in scale, it seems as though Türkiye will receive adequate assistance from the international community. A united global effort will be needed for this historic undertaking.

The upcoming Donors' Conference, under the initiative of European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen and the Swedish Presidency of the European Council, will be an important show of solidarity. The event aims to raise 5 billion euros to fund long-term projects for earthquake survivors in Türkiye and Syria, will assist in providing relief to the millions of people affected in the region. This level of solidarity will not only rebuild structures but also diplomatic bridges as well.