

Pressure grows on Turkish government over use of earthquake taxes

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JEDDAH: In the aftermath of the magnitude 7.0 earthquake in Izmir last Friday that killed at least 110 people, pressure is growing on the Turkish government to explain what happened to billions of dollars raised by a mandatory earthquake tax Turks have been paying for more than 20 years. The tax was introduced after a magnitude 7.4 quake in the Marmara region in 1999 that killed 17,000 people. The money from it is supposed to be used to fund projects to reinforce buildings and prepare cities to better cope with earthquakes.

However, experts and opposition politicians say that much of the revenue from the tax was not spent on earthquake-protection measures, and there are growing calls for detailed information about how the money was used.

Turkish citizens have paid as much as 147.2 billion Turkish lira (\$17.5 billion) in earthquake taxes since 1999. The country's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) accuses the government of misusing more than 71 billion lira that should have been used to protect cities from quakes.

On Thursday, prominent Turkish journalist Fatih Altayli said that since 2011 some of these taxes might have been spent on dealing with about 5 million Syrian refugees. Turkey has received €6 billion (\$7bn) in EU aid to help the country cope with migrants and refugees.

This allegation was also raised by CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu during a parliamentary speech. He asked where the earthquake taxes went and added: "But when it comes to Syrians, there is a lot of money."

Alpay Antmen, a lawyer and CHP politician, told Arab News: "This money was meant to be used for urban transformation and for making housing areas in the earthquake zones much more resilient. However, about 70 billion lira of these taxes was spent on other purposes, and this capital was transferred to the builders close to the government."

Last year, he said he submitted a parliamentary inquiry to Treasury and Finance Minister Berat Albayrak about the use of earthquake taxes. He was referred to the Interior Ministry, which told him it had no information. "They are collecting these taxes from taxpayers as earthquake taxes, then they merge it into the general budget," said Antmen. "The financial resources of the government are so depleted that it uses all available tools."

AFAD, Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Agency, which operates under the Interior Ministry, was harshly criticized for its response to the Izmir earthquake, after it asked people to send a text message if they needed blankets.

Allegations of corruption in the use of earthquake taxes are not new. In January, for example, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded to such claims by saying: "We spent it where it was meant to be spent ... we do not have the

time to provide accountability for matters like this.”

The CHP is now calling the government to account and demanding full transparency about how the taxes were used.

“When you spend the money of the citizens, you have to account for it,” said Antmen. “Otherwise it is unacceptable. Tens of billions of dollars have, however, been squandered for the relief of pro-government contractors’ debt burdens.”

CHP said that had revenue from the earthquake tax been used properly, millions of buildings around the country could have been strengthened to help them survive powerful earthquakes that are expected to hit Turkey, which lies on several active fault lines, in the coming decades.



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Rescuers weep with joy as Turkey pulls 2 girls from rubble70-year-old pulled out alive in Turkey as quake toll hits 60

Libyan parliamentarians meet for peace talks in Morocco

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Thu, 2020-11-05 18:13

RABAT: Libyan politicians from the war-ravaged North African nation's rival administrations met for the latest round of peace talks in Morocco on Thursday.

The lawmakers met in the coastal town of Bouznika, south of Morocco's capital Rabat, for talks that come ahead of a major meeting in Tunisia slated for November 9.

The talks follow a "permanent" UN-backed cease-fire agreement signed in Switzerland last month, intended to pave the way toward a political solution to the country's grinding conflict.

Libya, with Africa's largest proven crude oil reserves, has been wracked by conflict for nearly a decade, since the overthrow and killing of dictator Muammar Qaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011.

It has since been dominated by armed groups and divided between two administrations that have been bitterly-opposed: the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the capital Tripoli, and a rival administration in the east backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

Warring factions returned to the negotiating table in September in UN-supported talks, with negotiations being held in Morocco, Egypt and Switzerland.

Details of the agenda of the talks in Morocco have not been released.

Negotiators are pushing parallel efforts to broker peace, with the military section of talks taking place this week for the first time on Libyan soil.

On Tuesday, former enemy officers sat together in a joint military commission and agreed on a road map for implementing the cease-fire deal.



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Libya's rivals urge Security Council to back cease-fire
Libya UN envoy expects election date to be set at coming talks

[Thousands of buildings would be destroyed in a powerful quake in Istanbul, says report](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-11-05 22:13

ANKARA: A new study has said that major Turkish cities are poorly prepared a powerful quake – which experts believe is likely to occur in the coming decades.

This follows the 7.0-magnitude earthquake off Turkey's western coast on Friday afternoon that killed 114 in western city of Izmir and injured 1,035 people.

According to research carried out by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake in Istanbul would demolish or seriously damage around 48,000 buildings in the city, while another 194,000 buildings will be moderately damaged.

The study, which was prepared by Istanbul Planning Agency, claimed that one third of the roads within the city will be blocked in such an event, and there would be the threat of a tsunami, as well.

The Princes' Islands, a popular tourist destination just south of the city in the Sea of Marmara, are said to be at high risk from waves that could be more than 12 meters high.

The total damage caused by a major earthquake could reach 120 billion Turkish liras (\$14.27 billion) in Istanbul alone.

The level of preparedness of Istanbul is of key importance as the city is crossed by several fault lines and has suffered many quakes in the past.

Despite the fresh memories of a 7.6-magnitude quake in the Marmara region, to the south of Istanbul, that killed more than 17,000 people, experts fear the authorities have not been taking the necessary precautions.

"Although earthquakes are natural disasters, the loss of life and the collapse of houses do not derive from natural causes, but are man-made, preventable difficulties. Although it is impossible to prevent the earthquakes, it is possible to minimize the losses," the report said.

The ruling government has been harshly criticized for not disclosing where the earthquake taxes it has raised have been spent on. The Turkish presidency said 147.2 billion liras have been collected in the 17 years since the massive quake in 1999.

Ali Babacan, Turkey's former economy tsar and founder of the breakaway Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), suggested that the government should earmark the country's resources for constructing earthquake-resistant buildings, instead of spending them on profit-seeking projects such as the controversial 45-km-long Istanbul Canal between the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea.

Geologists and earthquake experts even fear that the canal could trigger earth movements, as 1-1.5 billion cubic meters of material will be excavated and used to form small islands in the Marmara Sea.

Burhanettin Bulut, a lawmaker from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), was among a team of politicians that conducted a field visit to Izmir just after the earthquake.

"This earthquake showed us that private contractors used cheap and inadequate

materials for these buildings. However, it is the duty of the state to enforce building codes and monitor all stages of their construction to monitor the earthquake-resiliency,” he told Arab News.

Bulut spoke to many earthquake victims and urged the authorities to act.

“We shouldn’t ignore the lives of our own citizens. The majority of the buildings that collapsed in Izmir benefited from the controversial zoning amnesty which was issued by the government ahead of the general election in 2018. Rather than focusing on rent-seeking activities in the major cities, there is an urgent need for a strict control over the construction sector,” he said.

With that zoning amnesty, about ten million illegally constructed buildings throughout the country gained approval. Izmir topped the list for the number of such buildings. In the recent tremor 20 buildings in Izmir collapsed and became “graveyards” for their unlucky residents.

The Turkish parliament approved the formation of an investigation committee on earthquake measures on Nov 3 – a motion that had long been requested by the opposition parties.

“From now on, the government should work with the experts on this issue because earthquake victims that I talked to were disillusioned. Everybody should learn serious lessons from this quake and take necessary precautions to protect human lives,” Bulut said.

Years ago, Ali Agaoglu, a famous figure in the construction business in Turkey and architect of dozens of luxury residential zones in Istanbul, described how poor-quality materials, including salty sea sand and scrap iron, were routinely used in the buildings his company constructed in the past.

“The buildings will collapse like paper in an eventual big earthquake in Istanbul,” he once said in a televised interview.



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Turkey quake death toll rises to 100: disaster agency
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[Child killed, several wounded in Houthi attacks on Taiz](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-11-05 21:45

AL-MUKALLA: Iran-backed Houthi mortar and drone attacks on military and civilian targets in Yemen's southern city of Taiz have killed a civilian and wounded at least 14 more, local military officers and residents said.

An explosive-laden drone hit a military post in Jabal Habashy district on Wednesday, wounding 10 soldiers, Abdul Basit Al-Baher, the Yemeni army spokesperson in Taiz, told Arab News by telephone on Thursday.

"The drone was carrying a large amount of explosive materials and detonated as soldiers were guarding their post," Al-Baher said.

Also on Wednesday, a primary school student was killed and four more wounded when a mortar shell fired by the Houthis exploded in a residential area in Camb district, east of Taiz, residents said.

The students were returning home from school when the shell landed, critically wounding one who later died at a local hospital.

Eshraq Al-Maqtari, a human rights activist in Taiz and who was at the scene of the explosion, said on Twitter that there had been no clashes between government forces and the Houthis in the area, currently under the control of government forces.

The Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF)-supported Al-Thawra Hospital in Taiz received three wounded children under the age of 10, and urged both sides to avoid targeting civilians.

“MSF reiterates its call to all armed groups to abide by international humanitarian law and take all necessary precautions to avoid civilian casualties,” the charity said on Twitter.

Yemen’s Ministry of Human Rights strongly condemned the Houthi shelling of residential areas, and called upon the international community to work on halting the deadly attacks and lifting the rebels’ siege of Taiz.

Intense fighting between government forces and the Houthis continued in the city on Thursday for the sixth consecutive day, as loyalists pushed to expel the Houthis from the suburbs.

Al-Baher said the fighting raged in the eastern and northeastern parts of the city, and that government forces liberated a street and a number of hills in the last three days.

For the last five years, Houthi militiamen have been in control of the city’s outskirts, from where they regularly shell Taiz’s heavily populated downtown areas.

The rebels have come under criticism from local and international rights organizations for blocking the deliveries of vital humanitarian supplies to millions of people in the city.

In the northern province of Jouf, fierce fighting between government forces and the Houthis raged on Wednesday and Thursday near the strategically important Al-Khanjer military base, leaving dozens dead on both sides.

Yemen’s Ministry of Defense said on Wednesday that army troops and allied tribesmen, backed by air cover from Arab coalition warplanes, pushed the Houthis from a number of locations north of Al-Khanjer.

Yemeni army commanders said they were cutting key supply lines to the Houthis before marching toward the city of Hazem, the capital of Jouf, that fell to the rebels in March.

In the capital city of Sanaa, and other Houthi controlled areas in northern Yemen, the rebels have in the last three days held several mass funerals for dozens of their fighters, including many field commanders, who were killed in fighting in different contested areas of the country.

Yemen's Human Rights Minister Mohammed Askar told Arab News that the Houthi attacks on civilian areas in Taiz showed that the militias were not serious about making peace in Yemen.

"What happened is a crime against humanity and a new escalation by the Houthis. It confirms the militia has no intention to make peace," the minister said.

Abdu Abdullah Majili, a Yemeni army spokesman, told Arab News the Houthis had violated human right laws and religious and social norms that prohibit targeting residential areas during war.

"We call upon the UN to condemn Houthi violations and to designate this criminal militia as a terrorist organization," Majili said.



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Arab coalition destroys armed Houthi drone targeting Saudi Arabia Houthis blamed for resurgence of infant polio in Yemen

[**Assad blames Syria's current economic**](#)

woes on Lebanese banks

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Thu, 2020-11-05 13:22

DAMASCUS, Syria: Syrian President Bashar Assad said much of his country's current economic distress is a direct result of the banking crisis in neighboring Lebanon, where many Syrian businessmen have traditionally kept their money.

Assad said that between \$20 billion and \$42 billion, held by Syrians, is estimated to be tied up in Lebanese banks. He spoke during a tour of a trade fair in Damascus with his wife on Wednesday.

"This number for an economy like Syria is a scary number," Assad said, according to a recording published by SANA, the state news agency.

Lebanon is experiencing a serious banking crisis, which has led to the introduction of informal capital controls to combat capital flight and prop a flailing local currency. Depositors are unable to make foreign transfers and there is a limit on how much they can withdraw.

Lebanese banks had offered a lifeline to the Syrian economy, which under the Assad family rule faced decades of Western sanctions that often targeted individual businessmen and cut off Syrian banks.

However, Assad did not blame the sanctions for the ongoing crisis as most government officials do. "When the banks in Lebanon closed, we paid the price. This is the essence of the problem," he said.

Low oil prices and poor access to the Kurdish-held northeast of Syria, where much of the country's wheat is grown, also played a part, he said.

Syria's economy is in shambles and the nine-year civil war has killed more than 400,000 and displaced half the country's population. The local Syrian currency crashed in recent months making it more difficult for many Syrians to buy food. More than 80% of the Syrian population live in poverty, according to UN

The spread of coronavirus in the war-torn country has further restricted economic activities and increased unemployment.



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Syria's Bashar Assad cuts tax for low-income workers
Lebanese banks under more pressure after landmark UK ruling