

Turkish earthquake triggers many unanswered questions

Tue, 2020-01-28 00:10

JEDDAH: Rescue operations continue amidst mountains of debris in eastern Turkey, following the deadly earthquake that hit the region on Friday with a magnitude of 6.8.

The quake, which followed two others in the western city of Manisa and the capital Ankara, has killed 33 people so far in Elazig province, and four in the neighboring Malatya province, with over 1,600 injured.

The country remains poised for further trouble, with a large quake in or around Istanbul feared possible in the coming days. "We're expecting a 7.5-magnitude earthquake in Istanbul," Turkey's Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu warned in a live broadcast.

Turkey, which has a history of powerful earthquakes, faced a 7.6 magnitude quake in August 1999 in the western city of Izmit, which killed over 17,000 people, while another in 2011 in eastern city of Van killed more than 500. However, not all lessons have been learned. Now, as then, authorities have been quick to criticize people who have questioned spending of funds raised by special earthquake taxes, meant to make vulnerable areas more resistant. Turkish prosecutors were quick to launch an investigation against Turkish actress Berna Lacin, after she shared her views on earthquake taxes on social media platform Twitter, asking: "Where are they spending all the quake taxes that have been collected so far?"

About 63 billion lira (\$10.598 billion) was collected in special taxes following the 1999 earthquake, which became a permanent tax in 2004.

Turkish politician Mahmut Tanal criticized the lack of transparency over the collection and allocation of funds, saying: "The taxes are not used as promised, but they are still being collected although humanitarian assistance ... is not conducted anymore."

He suggested that funds meant for earthquake relief and damage mitigation were being channeled toward other government budgets.

Burak Bilgehan Ozpek, a political scientist at TOBB University in Ankara, was also critical of the use of earthquake funds.

NUMBER

33 – people killed so far by the earthquake that rocked Elazig province and four in the neighboring Malatya province, with over 1,600 injured.

"Elazig's reconstruction ... has not been planned well by the municipality, and the result has been a disorganized city. That is the real danger. The fight against earthquakes should start first by the construction policies of municipalities," he said.

Award-winning scientist Naci Gorur criticized Turkey's lack of policies

concerning preparation for potential earthquakes.

Gorur, who has conducted extensive research on fault lines in the country, had alerted authorities of the possibility of an earthquake in Elazig, where he is from, three months before the Jan. 24 quake struck.

Meanwhile, the natural disaster has served as a point of contention in ongoing political hostilities between the Turkish government and separatist Kurdish factions.

The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, claiming it had attempted to send aid to the region to assist beleaguered residents, released an official statement on Sunday, saying: "Delivery of two aid trucks ... for Elazig earthquake victims has been obstructed by the Interior Ministry.

"There can be no explanation for blocking humanitarian aid to people in need. We call on the government to stop such practices at once."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, meanwhile, visited Malatya in the aftermath of the earthquake on Saturday.



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Turkey probes dozens over quake social media posts Turkish rescue teams hunt for quake survivors as death toll hits 36

Yemen's Marib province safe from Houthis, says governor

Tue, 2020-01-28 00:05

AL-MUKALLA, YEMEN: The central Yemeni province of Marib is safe from Houthi attacks, its governor told media on Sunday, amid reports that the Iranian-backed militia was making territorial gains in a neighboring district. "We will never allow Houthis to pollute Marib," Major Sultan Al-Aradah said, adding that thousands of tribesmen and troops were ready to resist Houthi approaches to the province's borders.

He told reporters that Marib had become a safe haven for thousands of internally displaced people who had fled a Houthi crackdown in Sanaa and other rebel-held areas.

"Marib will remain committed to its political leadership, the government, the (Saudi-led) coalition and the people. It will be protected by its honorable men (who come) from the army, security services and the Yemenis who live here," the governor said, welcoming the coalition's support.

Marib has hosted thousands of Yemeni army troops and others from the Saudi-led coalition, in addition to thousands of people who have fled their homes in Houthi-controlled territories.

The province's military bases have been used by the army and the coalition for training and arming thousands of soldiers who are battling Houthis in Nehim, Marib's Serwah, Baydha and Taiz.

An escalation of fighting in Nehim, Sanaa, has forced dozens of displaced people into fleeing their camps outside Marib city and heading to Hadramout. Residents in Hadramout's Aber district told Arab News that families had started arriving.

State media said on Monday that Saudi-led coalition warplanes had carried out intense airstrikes targeting Houthi locations in Nehim and Jawf.

BACKGROUND

Houthis have focused attacks on the western side of Taiz in an attempt to seize control of an important road that links the city with the southern port city of Aden.

A Houthi leader, Abu Abdul Aziz, and a number of militants were killed on Sunday as government forces engaged in heavy fighting on the western and eastern edges of the southern city of Taiz.

Local army officers said the government's escalation of fighting was aimed at easing the pressure on loyalists on Nehim's battlegrounds.

"The battlefields are connected. What happens here in Taiz will definitely affect the other battlefields," Abdul Basit Al-Baher, a Yemeni army spokesman in Taiz, told Arab News. "Fighting has not ceased since yesterday afternoon," he said, adding that the dead Houthi leader was thought to be the second or third most important rebel military commander in Taiz.

A mortar shell fired by Houthis landed at a local market on the city's western outskirts, killing three civilians and injuring several others. "They have fired at least 13 mortars and Katyusha rockets at residential areas in Taiz over the last several hours," Al-Baher said on Monday. Houthis have focused their attacks on the western side of Taiz in an attempt to seize control of an important road that links the city with the southern port city of Aden.



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UK supports Arab Coalition efforts in Yemen, British envoy says
Donald Trump to unveil Middle East peace plan that 'makes sense for everybody'

[Iraqi PM promises to boost protection for US embassy](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Mon, 2020-01-27 19:40

BAGHDAD: The Iraqi prime minister has promised to strengthen security for the US embassy in Baghdad after one person was injured in the latest missile attack on the compound.

Adel Abdul Mahdi stressed, in a phone call with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday, the importance of respecting Iraq's sovereignty by everyone.

He also said there was a need to de-escalate tensions in the region, according to a statement from his office.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, a top US commander for the Middle East, said on Monday mortars were used in the attack on the embassy that injured one person and caused some material damage the previous night, not katyusha rockets as was initially reported by staffers and a statement from the military.

The mortar attack started a fire that was put out. He said no US military members were injured, but that one US national received a minor injury but has returned to work.

The US embassy is within the Iraqi capital's Green Zone, and has been a flashpoint amid wider regional tensions between the US and Iran, which have played out inside Iraq in recent weeks. Iraqi supporters of an Iran-backed militia stormed the embassy compound on Dec. 31, smashing the main door and setting fire to the reception area.

An initial military statement said at least five katyusha rockets had landed inside the Green Zone late Sunday. It was the third attack targeting the US embassy this month, and the perpetrators were not immediately known.

Perpetrators had used katyusha rockets in previous attacks and caused no injuries.

There was no claim of responsibility for any of the attacks. But the US has accused Iran-backed militias of targeting US interests by attacking military bases housing Americans and diplomatic missions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdel Mahdi to uphold his country's "sovereignty" in the face of "attacks" from Iran on US facilities in Iraq.

Pompeo "expressed his outrage at the continued assaults by Iran's armed groups against US facilities in Iraq, including yesterday's rocket attacks against our Embassy, which resulted in one injury," the State Department said in a statement.

The statement said that "these attacks demonstrate a wanton disregard for Iraqi sovereignty and a failure to rein in these dangerous armed groups."

Pompeo said on Twitter that "the government of #Iraq must take immediate steps to protect our diplomatic facilities as required by international law."

* With AP/AFP



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Three rockets hit US embassy in BaghdadTwo rockets hit near US embassy in Baghdad

[Syrian Kurds ready for dialogue with Turkey, says SDF chief](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-01-27 02:11

JEDDAH: Mazloun Kobani, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), expressed the group's readiness for dialogue with Turkey.

"We have tried our best to fix our problems with Turkey. As the SDF, as the YPG, we have had direct talks with Turkey in the past and are ready to do so again. We want peace," he told Al-Monitor on Thursday.

"Turkey should never mistake our goodwill for weakness and should be prepared to reciprocate our goodwill."

Ankara conducted an operation in northern Syria in early October against the

People's Protection Units (YPG), the dominant group in the SDF.

The YPG and the SDF have been among Washington's main allies in the fight against Daesh. As such, Ankara's operation created another point of contention between Turkey and the US.

On Oct. 22, 2019, Ankara and Moscow reached a deal under which the YPG would pull back 30 km south of Turkey's border with Syria, to open an area for Turkish-Russian security patrols.

Turkey should never mistake our goodwill for weakness and should be prepared to reciprocate our goodwill.

Mazloun Kobani, DF commander

Amberin Zaman, an expert on Kurdish affairs who conducted the interview with Kobani, said dialogue presents clear benefits for both sides.

"Dialogue could pre-empt further attacks by Turkey," she told Arab News, adding that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan "has threatened to expand operations, so that's the first big advantage."

Dialogue also gives the SDF some leverage vis-a-vis the Syrian regime and Russia, and makes it easier for the US to remain in northeast Syria as its protector, she said. "For Turkey, it would expand its influence in Syria immediately and directly," she added.

Ankara considers the YPG a terrorist group and the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a separatist group that has been fighting the Turkish state for more than 35 years and is designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US and the EU.

Zaman said dialogue between the SDF and Turkey offers opportunities for trade, and for an easing of tensions between Ankara and Washington, at least over Syria.

"Most critically, it will set the stage for re-engagement between Ankara and its own Kurds if and when Erdogan feels ready and in need of doing this. It's by now well-established that a military solution is no solution to the Kurdish problem," she added.

FASTFACT

Ankara's operation in Syria created another point of dispute between Turkey and the US.

The tomb of Suleiman Shah, the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, was moved by Turkish troops from the Syrian city of Kobani to the village of Esme when Kobani was besieged by Daesh militants.

"We know that Turkey wants to return Suleiman Shah's remains to Kobani and to rebuild his tomb there. Provided that Turkey does not mistake our goodwill for weakness we would be happy to help Turkey ... conduct such an operation in a spirit of peace and based on the understanding that this spirit of peace will be reciprocal," Kobani said, underlying the importance of "confidence-building and goodwill gestures."

Residents of the rebel-held Syrian province of Idlib “are welcome to seek shelter in the areas under our control,” he added.

“We know that Turkey, which already has a huge burden with nearly 4 million Syrians living there, is deeply concerned by a fresh influx of up to a million Syrian refugees from Idlib because of escalating regime attacks on Idlib. Our call to the people of Idlib helps relieve Turkey’s burden,” he said.

“Again, in the spirit of goodwill and above all on humanitarian grounds we are ready to work with Turkey if and when the need arises to help move civilians out of harm’s way in Idlib and bring them here.”

He said US President Donald Trump gave him his word to help broker peace between the SDF and Ankara. “We do want to end our differences with Turkey,” Kobani added.



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Protesters in Iraq defy top cleric, return to the streets
Fighting rages as Libya force pushes toward key western city

[**Protesters in Iraq defy top cleric,**](#)

return to the streets

Author:

Mon, 2020-01-27 02:09

BAGHDAD: Hundreds of anti-government protesters flooded the streets of Iraq's capital and southern provinces on Sunday, defying a powerful Iraqi religious leader who recently withdrew his support from the popular movement.

Security forces fired tear gas and live rounds to disperse the crowds from the capital's Khilani Square, medical and security officials said. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

At least 22 demonstrators were reported wounded by Iraqi security forces, as the street rallies continued to grow in size.

The mass protests started in October over widespread government corruption and a lack of public services and jobs. They quickly grew into calls for sweeping changes to Iraq's political system that was imposed after the 2003 US invasion. Iraqi security forces have responded harshly. At least 500 protesters have been killed since the unrest began.

Iraq also has been roiled by US-Iran tensions that threatened a regional war after an American drone strike this month killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani near Baghdad.

The US attack pushed the Shiite cleric and political leader, Muqtada Al-Sadr, to turn his influence toward demanding an American troop withdrawal. He also dropped his support for the anti-government movement on Friday.

Hundreds of protesters, mostly students, marched Sunday through key squares in the capital and southern Iraq to show their continued support for the anti-government movement, despite Al-Sadr's reversal of position.

"The demonstrations have become stronger now because of what happened," said Zaidoun, 26, a protest organizer in Baghdad.

HIGHLIGHT

The mass protests started in October over widespread government corruption and a lack of public services and jobs.

Many demonstrators chanted slogans against the populist preacher. The movement opposes Iraq's sectarian system and both US and Iranian influence in Iraqi affairs.

Some protesters were worried, however, that the departure of Al-Sadr's supporters and his militia members from Baghdad's Tahrir Square, the hub of the protest movement, could spark a renewed security crackdown.

On Saturday, hours after Al-Sadr's supporters left protest sites in Baghdad and some southern cities, including Basra, security forces swooped in to clear areas of demonstrators and torch their sit-in tents. At least four protesters were killed in the crackdown.

With Al-Sadr out of the picture, protesters said the only top leader on their side was Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Iraq's most revered Shiite cleric. Many said they were hoping his weekly Friday sermon would boost morale ahead

of a major planned protest for Jan. 31.

In a statement posted online, Al-Sadr called on the protesters to return their movement to its “initial course,” in what many anti-government activists interpreted as a veiled threat.

The statement added that Al-Sadr could boost his support for the “heroic” security forces if protesters didn’t heed his calls.

Al-Sadr had called on his followers to stage a rival protest targeting the US embassy on Sunday, before rescinding the order shortly after.

In a statement from his office, Al-Sadr asked Iraqis “who reject the American occupation” to gather at key assembly points later that evening. A spokesperson from his office later said the decision had been reversed.



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Iraq protesters keep up rallies despite pressure from riot police Pope backs Iraqi call for its sovereignty to be respected