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Anger grows among Turkey's earthquake survivors over broken promises



Lorraine Mallinder
in Kahramanmaraş

Residents have lost trust in a regime that they feel has betrayed them

The building is barely standing, great chunks of concrete ripped from the front, a radiator hanging by a thin pipe from the fourth floor. Yet Alper Nedirli and his mother Sevim have just risked their lives, climbing to their quake-hit apartment on the second floor to retrieve a couple of bags of clothes, plates and cups, some pictures, and a rug.

This is all they have left in the world. They had to act fast, as their block in the azi Beyneighbourhood, the only one still standing in a wasteland of rubble in Kahramanmaraş, the epi-

centre of the deadly twin quakes that devastated southern Turkey on February 6th, is slated for demolition in the next fortnight. "We were very afraid," says the 30-year-old, stuffing some items into a plastic bag. "I thought the building might collapse at any time."

For now, Nedirli and his 60-year-old mother are staying with relatives, waiting for the government to provide a temporary container home. In February, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Kahramanmaraş, promising that homes would be rebuilt by next year.

But residents of the town – 75 per cent of whom voted for Erdo an in the 2018 election – have lost trust in a regime that they feel has betrayed them.

Shattered lives

Anger is growing among survivors as they struggle to piece their shattered lives together. Many here hold Erdo an directly responsible for the shoddy building standards that resulted in nearly 46,000 deaths in Turkey, according to UN figures.

They are furious about the 2018 amnesty that retroactively approved the poorly-made en-

tomb their residents. And they want to know what happened to the billions of dollars collected from two earthquake solidarity taxes imposed since the 1999 Turkish earthquake.

Driving his minibus through town, Gökay Gökpinar (36) is livid that warnings were not heeded. He notes that leading geologist Naci Görür had predicted several times that Kahramanmaraş would be hit, but was ignored.

"Now everyone says he was right. We wish we had listened to him, but it is too late," says Gökpinar, driving past diggers collecting rubble. He points out the Has el Sites building on Trabzon Boulevard, its entrance with red sign still intact. Behind it, a building lies flattened. His uncle, aunt and two cousins died in its rubble.

Gökpinar is living in a tent on the outskirts of Kahramanmaraş, while trying to eke out a living – few people are travelling these days, so his income has plummeted from 10,000 Turkish lira (€470) a month to half of that.

His home, which he had already paid for, has been declared uninhabitable by surveyors who visited from Ankara. He sought a second opinion, but to no avail. And now, like Nedirli and thousands of oth-

ers, he is waiting on a container to live in.

"We don't trust the government. They say they will rebuild in one year because of the election. They say these things to get the voters and then they do nothing," he says, referring to the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for May 14th. "It took me 10 years to pay for my house. Now I feel those 10 years went into the rub-

aster management agency, AFAD. Spring is in the air and children are playing in the grass, watched by adults sitting on stools outside their tents. But the nights since February have been bitterly cold, with frequent flooding.

Emre and Rabia Armut, both 23, are sitting on the wall outside the camp. They escaped from their rented home on Sokakka 1 Street just minutes before it collapsed. They stayed with Emre's sister for a while, where they were able to borrow some clothes, but eventually had to move to Atatürk Park. Freezing at night in their unheated tent, Rabia lost her unborn baby.

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Manent of reckoning Like most here, they are penniless. Emre having lost his work as an electrician. They, too, are waiting for a container. They've given up on the idea of living in an apartment anytime soon.

"Even a container didn't come in two months. How will a house come in one year?" says Rabia.

Talking to locals in the town, it seems that Erdo an is facing his moment of reckoning. He obtained power by leveraging anger over the 1999 earthquake, which left more than 17,000 dead, provoking a similar sense of betrayal over mis-

management and corruption. In the run-up to next month's vote, it is clear that he has lost Kahramanmaraş. But many fear he may benefit from confusion caused by the quake, with 2.7 million people displaced across the country, according to the International Organisation for Migration. Amid the upheaval, many may not be able to vote.

Pelin Pinar Giritliolu, Istanbul head of the Chamber of City Planners, believes the earthquake highlighted the regime's lack of transparency. Nobody knows what happened to the revenue collected from the earthquake taxes, which were supposed to make buildings quake-resistant. "They are saying the money was collected in pools and they can't tell which is which," she says.

■ Gokay Gokpinar, who is living in a tent on the outskirts of Kahramanmaraş.

PHOTOGRAPH: LORRAINE MALLINDER

"The problem in the ruling party is not just about the earthquake. They have lost their transparency about the information they give to people. We have an economic crisis and the crisis of a free press, and this is all showing now. We believe the government should go."