

EUROPE &amp; CENTRAL ASIA

# Government Emergency Management Following the February 6th Earthquake in Turkey

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Especially in natural disasters, emergency management is a critical function of any government. However, in countries with a rigidly centralized government such as Turkey, emergency management is mainly the responsibility of the central government because it shares only very limited authority with local administrations. Therefore, it is the government that must mitigate the potential damage, preempt rescue operations, and responds to the disaster competently.

A devastating earthquake shook southeastern Turkey on February 6th, leaving thousands of people dead and more than one hundred thousand people injured. Over [thirteen million people](#) have been living in the vicinity of the earthquake epicenter. Built structures in ten provinces were heavily damaged. Official numbers reveal that over six thousand residences [collapsed](#), and more were left uninhabitable. The death toll [approached to forty thousand](#) on the tenth day after the earthquake and is estimated to increase in the following days. The country requested international aid for rescue and recovery operations. The event was clearly a catastrophe that escalated due to poor preparedness and incompetence in responding to the emergency. The government [is blamed](#) for its willful negligence, malpractice, and embezzlement.

In responding to an earthquake, there are several entities on local and national levels in Turkey that are supposed to work in coordination with one another to move quickly for the rescue of victims in case of a disaster. However, the excessive control of the government on the current response to the earthquake bears the potential to be a textbook example of how

*not* to deal with emergencies. Emergency management is a critical function of a government. As Turkey has a rigidly centralized government structure that allows only very limited authority for local administrations, emergency management is mainly the responsibility of the central government.

In fact, the February 6<sup>th</sup> disaster was not the first severe earthquake the country has faced over the past decades. There have been many others in the past mainly because the country is located at the intersection of two major tectonic plates. For instance, the 1999 earthquake in Izmit hit another region in the country and caused over seventeen thousand deaths and severe social and economic devastation. In the aftermath of that disaster, the government began collecting additional taxes (the so-called earthquake taxes) to compensate for mitigation and preparedness activities that the then-government had failed to plan and execute. Therefore, Turkish people are currently questioning how the collected earthquake tax money has been spent under the rule of the AKP (i.e., ruling Justice and Development Party) over the past 21 years, and why the country failed to learn any lessons from its mistakes in the past.

In principle, governments must integrate emergency management into [daily decisions](#); it is not a function that is only emphasized during disasters. Emergency management comprises four phases: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. The first three phases occur before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. The last phase, recovery, refers to long-term efforts after a disaster that spans for months or years to repair the physical, environmental, social, psychological, and financial damage.

In the case of Turkey, the country is still in the response phase; rescue operations carry on, and the media show people still being pulled out of collapsed buildings. It is too early to evaluate the government's recovery efforts. Nonetheless, there are enough data and observations to assess the (in)competence of the central government in the first three phases of emergency management.

In emergency management, the first phase, mitigation, refers to the methods and practices that can minimize a hazard's potential damage to people, nature, or properties. Structural and non-structural mitigation are two types of mitigation efforts that have evolved through

technology, research, and experiences over the years. Within the realm of natural disasters, earthquakes are a reality of everyday life, particularly in earthquake-prone areas. Therefore, scientists and practitioners have developed various mitigation techniques to reduce the impact of these unavoidable natural hazards.

For example, many industrialized countries with a high likelihood of experiencing earthquakes, such as Japan, adopt and enforce building codes to prevent damage and losses. Surprisingly, constructing a new building with earthquake-resistant technology, such as base isolation, costs only five to ten percent more money than a building with no protection. Yet, most construction companies in Turkey did not utilize such life-saving techniques to avoid additional costs. For instance, an owner of a construction company is accused of the death of hundreds after a residence was built by his company because his building collapsed in the earthquake. The building housed over 700 people, and the company owner was arrested at the airport right after the disaster while trying to flee abroad to avoid a trial in Turkey. On the political side, the government is trying to put the blame on the private construction companies to divert the public anger away from itself. However, the government does not strictly enforce building codes or inspect buildings for compliance. Arguably, corruption is endemic in the construction industry, and constructors can easily obtain permits when they shouldn't by bribing officials.

Furthermore, earthquake retrofitting is another technique that can be used to strengthen already-constructed buildings; however, it is also rarely applied in Turkey. Non-structural mitigation techniques, such as insurance, are also ignored by most residents. According to the official numbers, less than half of the houses in the earthquake-affected zone have insurance covering the damages.

The second phase in emergency management - preparedness - includes training, raising awareness, conducting exercises and drills, education, and having trained personnel, supplies, and equipment to respond to disasters. Turkey falls behind in disaster preparation. The AFAD (The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) is a FEMA-like organization in Turkey, and it is chartered under the Ministry of Interior. Furthermore, the AFAD has less than eight thousand personnel all over the country. Only a limited number of personnel serve in any rescue or response capacity.

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Emergency management scholars [argue](#) that at least a hundred rescue personnel and support staff should work for rescue efforts distributed in three shifts to ensure 24-hour operations for each collapsed building to save lives in critical hours. The first few days are critical in the aftermath of an earthquake disaster. Because such operations require a very large number of trained staff, the specialized units in the military come in handy since they can rapidly move into the disaster zones with ease. A simple estimation of Turkey's earthquake experience suggests the current rescue operations need thousands of rescue personnel. This is mainly because it is very rare to see a single-family house in Turkish city centers. On average, buildings have [five floors](#) in Turkish cities, with each floor having multiple apartments. More than six thousand buildings have totally collapsed. Apparently, the Turkish government was unable to prepare the AFAD and Turkey's military for a response to supply personnel and equipment and transfer them to the affected regions.

The political control over emergency management organizations, such as the AFAD, may have a role to play in the level of incompetence in preparedness for an effective response. Recently, a member of the parliament from the main opposition party, CHP, investigated the financial transactions within the AFAD using the Court of Accounts reports and [revealed](#) that over half a billion dollars were transferred from the AFAD to undisclosed recipients for use in AKP's political campaigns.

In a similar vein, the government has been heavily criticized for its ineffective response to the earthquake. The director of rescue operations at AFAD, İsmail Palakoğlu, has no emergency management experience. He is a theologian who used to work in the religious affairs administration. As a political Islamist party, the AKP governments have assigned officials not based on their merit but on their loyalty to the party, especially since the alleged [corruption scandal](#) in 2013 and the failed coup attempt in 2016.

Several media outlets argued that the rescue operations were poorly organized, proved to be inadequate, and arrived too late. This argument resonated on social media as well when the people in the affected areas created relevant content in large volumes. On the other hand, the government's main concern seems to protect its public image from tarnishing before the upcoming elections. It imposed [censorship](#) on Twitter to ward off criticism and avoid any

damage to its public image while the country gets close to the general elections in May. President Erdogan even delivered a press meeting, using threatening language against those who criticized the government. However, the victims, survivors, and volunteers continue to use Twitter to communicate, and this censorship has caused a significant backlash.

Volunteers and survivors report that they hear calls for help coming from under the rubble for days, but they cannot reach them as they do not have the necessary equipment to move the heavy concrete blocks. Those who survived the earthquake but are not pulled out of the buildings in time face death due to hypothermia and dehydration.

Currently, Turkey is facing one of the most devastating disasters in its history. Many people, organizations, and government agencies worldwide send supplies, donations, and prayers to those affected. While earthquakes are unavoidable, the damage they cause can be mitigated, and the risk can be reduced to a manageable level. Unfortunately, millions in Turkey now suffer the consequences of corrupt government policies and negligence. For Turkish citizens, nothing is left but to hope that the government does better in the recovery phase and heals the physical, social, and emotional wounds. Unfortunately, a tangible recovery plan has not been revealed to the public yet.

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