

Three Things That Went Wrong In Turkey's Earthquake Response



HATAY, TURKEY - FEBRUARY 20: Bulldozers work to clear the rubble of destroyed buildings on February 20, 2023 in Hatay, Turkey. A 7.8-magnitude earthquake hit near Gaziantep, Turkey, in the early hours of February 6, followed by another 7.5-magnitude tremor just after midday. The quakes caused widespread destruction in southern Turkey and northern Syria and has killed more than 40,000 people. (Photo by Chris McGrath/Getty Images) - GETTY IMAGES

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The earthquakes that struck Turkey on February 6, 2023, had revealed significant shortcomings in the government's response, contributing to the enormous loss of life. The three key failures included a lack of flexibility in planning, a lack of coordination, and an initial politicized response. These glaring inadequacies highlight the importance of scrutinizing the reaction to such crises, as it is critical to ensuring that they do not occur again.

As a country with a long history of seismic activity, Turkey is well acquainted with natural disasters and has a dedicated disaster management authority known as AFAD. In fact, the authority had anticipated a 7.5 magnitude earthquake striking the town of Pazarcik more than three years before the actual 7.7 magnitude tremor hit the town. In preparation for such an event, the organization conducted a drill in 2019, with the anticipation of receiving help from neighboring cities. However, it appears that they did not expect the tremors to impact such a vast expanse, including at least 10 cities that were supposed to provide aid

and numerous towns spanning hundreds of square kilometers. The earthquake was so massive that it spanned over 280 miles in length and 180 miles in width.

When it comes to disasters of a massive scale, there is only one organization in Turkey with the ability to respond effectively - the military. Their exceptional transportation and communication capabilities, combined with their rigorous NATO-trained discipline, would have been vital in coordinating rescue efforts. However, the failure to allocate a significant role to the military in the earthquake response resulted in their absence during the crucial early hours and days when lives could have been saved. Speaking to volunteers who aided in the rescue efforts during the catastrophic 1999 earthquakes that rocked northwestern Turkey, they credit the military for rapidly bringing order to the chaotic aftermath of the quake.

Turkey's current presidential governance model is highly centralized, posing challenges for organizations on the ground to respond with the necessary flexibility. Although centralized systems are commonly lauded for their capacity to streamline decision-making and emergency response, the recent earthquake in Turkey has exposed their limitations. The rigidity of centralization has hindered the decision-making process, and local actors have faced intense criticism for their slow response.

The authoritarian nature of Turkey's governance restricts the space for opposition and civil society. Over the years, the Turkish civil society has weakened, making it difficult for them to coordinate and organize rescue and relief efforts. As the society becomes less organized outside the state, its ability to respond to disasters and crises is reduced.

The disaster management authority's failure to have contingency plans has been revealed in the wake of the recent earthquake. They did not allocate a significant role to the military, nor did they encourage and facilitate civil society participation in such events. If they had prepared better, such plans could have been implemented, potentially mitigating the damage caused by this earthquake.

The lack of coordination was another significant issue that surfaced in the aftermath of the Turkish earthquakes. Despite anticipating the occurrence of such seismic activity, the government failed to prepare for how coordination would be carried out, leaving several organizations on the ground unsure of who would take the lead in such an event. Numerous reports from those present in the quake zone indicate that the state failed to coordinate effectively, resulting in delays that proved fatal to many. Despite boasting a powerful network of security institutions, including the military, intelligence, gendarmerie, police, and watchmen network, and operating overseas in several countries, there was

reportedly little to no intervention by the security agencies in the immediate aftermath of the quake.

The advanced equipment and resources of Turkey's military and intelligence complex, including highly-touted drones, electronic surveillance, on-the-ground human intelligence networks, and heavy transport and communication equipment, were all available to respond to the recent earthquakes. However, these assets were not utilized to their full potential during the crisis, despite their proven effectiveness in even the challenging war circumstances. Furthermore, GSM mobile operators responsible for ensuring uninterrupted access to communication and the internet during the disaster were unable to maintain reliable service, further hindering rescue and relief efforts.

Finally, the Turkish earthquake response was also plagued by a troubling politicization, with state officials more focused on suppressing information than promoting cooperation and communication. Twitter was a vital tool for coordinating rescue and relief efforts, but the state slowed down access to the platform under the guise of fighting disinformation. Given the critical role of social media in coordinating rescue and relief efforts, this approach has been deemed particularly problematic by experts and observers alike.

To this day, state officials and ruling party members continue to discourage involvement from civil society and opposition initiatives, which has been widely criticized as a hindrance to effective crisis response.

The failure of the Turkish government to respond effectively to the recent earthquakes highlights the need for Turkey and other states to review their disaster response plans and avoid making the same mistakes. This is especially crucial given an anticipated earthquake that could occur in Istanbul, Turkey's economic hub and the country's largest city. The lessons learned from this crisis should also be studied by businesses and organizations to avoid the mismanagement of critical resources during a crisis.

Discussion Questions

Evaluate the different factors that worsened Türkiye's response to the 2023 earthquake mentioned in this article. Which was most significant and why?

How does this relate to our understanding of risk, vulnerability and exposure?

Do you think Singapore is in a position to recover from a similar disaster? Why or why not?