A Total of 6,319 Syrians Died Due to the Earthquake, Including 2,157 in Non-Regime Territories, and 321 in Regime Territories, While 3,841 Died in Turkey

An investigation should be launched into why the UN and international community’s response was days late, causing more Syrian deaths, and those responsible must be held accountable.
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**Introduction: Northwest Syria Has Been Worst Affected By the Earthquake Due to the Overpopulation There Caused by the Syrian Regime’s Displacement of Millions of Syrians:**

Northwest Syria has long suffered from severe overpopulation due to the continuous massive waves of internally displaced people (IDPs) fleeing there after being forcibly displaced from other areas by multiple violations perpetrated against them, overwhelmingly by the Syrian regime. Even more tragic, these already traumatized people have been forced to repeatedly relive the horrors of indiscriminate bombardment by the Syrian regime, even after fleeing their homes and local areas. On November 6, 2022, for instance, we documented an attack on IDP camps by the Syrian regime involving the use of cluster munitions, in which nine civilians, including four children, were killed. Due to the aforementioned overpopulation resulting from these waves of displacement and the deliberate targeting of infrastructure and vital facilities for years by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally, the magnitude 7.7 earthquake that hit southern Turkey and northern Syria on February 6, 2023 had an even more catastrophic and tragic impact than in northwestern Syria than anywhere else.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) responded instantly to the earthquake. Since the very first moments, we have been monitoring and recording the death toll caused by the earthquake and the late response by the UN and the international community. Unfortunately, however, SNHR’s own field team in Syria, particularly in the areas hit by the earthquake was itself painfully affected by the quake, as was our team in the Turkish cities hit by the earthquake in the south of the country, with many of our members losing their homes. These conditions have only intensified the difficulty of continuing our constant documentation processes compared with similar incidents. Furthermore, the massive number of deaths in the earthquake, spanning a vast geographical area, extending vertically from southern Turkey to Damascus suburbs in central Syria and horizontally from the western suburbs of Aleppo to Jabla on the Syrian coast in the east, was another challenge in the documentation process, in addition to the fact that the earthquake left entire towns, including Jendeires and Harem in northwest Syria, almost completely destroyed.

The largest single massacre we had previously documented took place on August 21, 2023, when the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in the two, Eastern and Western, Ghoutas, killing a total of 1,144 victims, including 99 children. In that case, documenting the victims took several days, even though all the deaths were centered in two geographical areas; in the case of the February 6 earthquake, however, multiple areas were affected, causing exponentially more deaths than any single previous event. Therefore, this report from SNHR, reflects the bare minimum of events and of the consequent suffering caused by the earthquake to date. In fact, the earthquake death toll is still rising, with SNHR set to release updated figures in next few days. It should be noted that we have categorized the victims according to the location of their deaths rather than by their areas of origin. For more information, please read details of our methodology.
Additionally, this report also summarizes the main rescue mechanisms implemented or not implemented by the UN, with SNHR demanding that all the relevant UN agencies identify and explain the reasons for their response being prevented and delayed for vital days, resulting in many more wholly preventable deaths. We also question the UN’s decision not to issue a distress call for the northwestern region of Syria, as it did for the areas under Syrian regime control, which, accordingly, received large quantities of aid. It goes without saying that we care as deeply for the wellbeing of the Syrian people in regime-controlled territories as we do for our other compatriots in non-regime areas and everywhere; as with any disaster, however, the areas that are worst affected should automatically be given the most urgent priority.

A second factor impeding access to aid has been the behavior of the controlling forces on the ground. The Syrian regime has consistently demonstrated that it is by far the worst offender in terms of the theft of UN aid, with regime insiders and military forces stealing as much as 90 percent of the aid donated. This shameful behavior has been well-documented in many previous reports released since 2014, with one notable and significant example among these being a 2019 report released by our colleagues at Human Rights Watch, ‘Rigging the System’.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, Director of SNHR, says,

The families of the victims who died in the earthquake have the right to know why the UN and international response was days late, even though the first 24 hours is the most urgent and essential time window in such cases. The UN should launch an internal investigation, while international human rights groups and investigative journalism outlets should shed light on this dark side of the story. The donor states must learn from these disastrous mistakes and build an international impartial coordination platform that could play a crucial central role in relief efforts and in the distribution of international aids in non-regime territories.
I. A Total of 6,319 Syrians Died Due to the Earthquake and the Lateness of the UN’s and International Community’s Response

Between February 6 and February 14, SNHR documented the deaths of 6,139 Syrians due to the earthquake and to the late response by the UN and international community. These deaths are distributed according to territory as follows:

- 2,157 in areas not controlled by the Syrian regime (northwestern Syria).
- 321 in Syrian regime-controlled areas.
- 3,841 Syrian refugees who died in Turkey.

Victims are distributed according to the areas where they died:

1. Non-regime territories

SNHR documented 2,157 deaths in the region of northwestern Syria which is controlled by the armed opposition/Syrian National Army (SNA), and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). These are distributed as follows:

A. Idlib suburbs: we recorded 1,283 deaths distributed across the cities, towns, villages and rural areas of Idlib suburbs as follows:
B. Aleppo suburbs: we recorded 874 deaths distributed across the cities, towns, villages and rural areas of Aleppo suburbs as follows:

2. Regime-controlled territories

SNHR team recorded 321 deaths in Syrian regime-controlled territories, distributed as follows:

- **Latakia governorate**: 246, mostly in Jabla
- **Aleppo city**: 41
- **Hama city**: 32
- **Damascus suburbs**: 2 in Harasta
3. In Turkey

We recorded the death of 3,841 Syrians in Turkey. We categorized the victims according to their Syrian governorate of origin, rather than the location of their death in Turkey. They are distributed as follows:
II. A Breakdown of the UN Mechanisms that Failed to Respond to the Victims of the Earthquake in Northwestern Syria

The first consignment of UN humanitarian aid sent in response to the earthquake arrived in northwestern Syria on February 9 - three days after the earthquake, consisting of six truckloads supplied by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) entered Syria via the Bab al-Hawa Crossing.1 The second aid consignment arrived on February 10 in an additional 14 trucks also supplied by the IOM,2 while the third aid convoy, which entered Syria on February 11, consisted of 22 trucks carrying relief aid supplies provided by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the UN Population Fund, and the World Health Organization (WHO).3 Additionally, on February 12, 10 trucks supplied by the IOM entered as the fourth convoy.4 On February 13, the fifth convoy, consisting of six trucks supplied by the World Food Programme (WFP) entered Syria.5 On February 14, two UN convoys carrying relief aid entered Syria. The first convoy of 11 trucks supplied by the IOM entered via the Bab al-Salalm crossing, which had previously been shut down by the Security Council since 2020, while the second, consisting of 26 trucks carrying relief aid supplied by the IOM, the UNHCR, and the WHO, entered via the Bab al-Hawa crossing. In total, as of February 14, the UN has delivered only 95 trucks to northwestern Syria to aid the millions there affected by the earthquake.

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
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Addressing its horrifically late response, the UN cited a number of pretexts. On February 7, Madevi Sun-Suon the spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), stated that the flow of essential aid from Turkey to northwestern Syria had been temporarily halted due to damage to roads, as well as other logistical issues caused by the devastating earthquake that hit the two countries. "Some roads are broken, some are inaccessible. There are logistical issues that need to be worked through," Sun-Suon said. On February 8, Jens Learke, a spokesperson for the OCHA, said that the "cross-border operation has itself been impacted." This claim was contradicted by a statement made the same day by António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, however, in which the UN chief asserted that the Bab al-Hawa crossing remained intact and could be used to deliver humanitarian assistance.

The fact that dozens of vehicles carrying the bodies of Syrian earthquake victims who died in Turkey were able to travel freely from Turkey to Syria on February 7 and February 8 demonstrably discredits these claims by UN officials and agencies. We, at SNHR, believe that there are other, factors in play that have yet to be revealed, and insist that these must be investigated to expose the true reason behind this lethally late response, since responding to any earthquake in the first 12-24 hours immediately following it is critically important. The arrival of massively inadequate quantities of aid four days late is simply a shocking sign of shameful indifference and negligence towards the lives of those trapped under the rubble, sending a wholly negative message to the families of these innocent victims, that they are simply to be abandoned.

Listed below are the UN agencies and other bodies that should have responded immediately to the earthquake in northwestern Syria.

1. **The teams under the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC)**

The UNDAC is part of the international emergency response system put in place for sudden on-set emergencies, and was specifically designed to aid disaster-struck states in the first phases of sudden-onset emergencies. The UNDAC assists the UN in assessing disasters and coordinating international relief efforts on the national level in the affected areas.6 The UNDAC has the authority to mobilize and support search and rescue teams in response to crises all around the world, as it did in Turkey. However, according to the information received by SNHR, this did not happen in northwestern Syria. Moreover, our field teams confirmed that, as of this writing, no UNDAC teams have been deployed to northwestern Syria, further exacerbating the disaster and allowing more preventable deaths.

2. **International Search and Rescue Advisory Groups (INSARAG)**

Photo showing mass graves being prepared in al-Halfa Cemetery in Idlib city for some of the victims of the earthquake that hit northern and western Syria on February 6, 2023. The photo was taken on February 10, 2023.

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SNHR believes that the INSARAG, a network of disaster-response groups and organizations in states prone to natural disasters, which is dedicated to urban search and rescue and operational field coordination,⁷ should have deployed teams to northwestern Syria via the Turkish borders from the first hours following the earthquake. We also believe that Syria's northwestern region should have been prioritized not only due to being the worst-affected area but also because the great majority of its residents are now living below the poverty line; it should be noted that a principle of the INSARAG group is to give priority to developing counties. According to our teams on the ground, there is still no INSARG presence in northwestern Syria. We must stress that had INSARG helped in responding to the earthquake, it would have made a vast difference, saving the lives of many victims who instead died under the rubble.

3. The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) for the needs of northwestern Syria

The CERF, which was specifically established to provide a rapid humanitarian response to aid individuals affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts, is or should be one of the quickest and most effective means to ensure the swift delivery of necessary humanitarian assistance to people trapped in crises. We, at SNHR, believe the mandate of the CERF should have been invoked in the earthquake as part of the response to the multi-faceted plight of the residents of northwestern Syria, already suffering grievously from the effects of the armed conflict in Syria and now enduring additional suffering as a result of the devastating earthquake.

On February 7, the CERF released a $25 million grant to help "kick-start" the earthquake response.⁸ We recommend that those funds should be distributed giving top priority to the areas worst affected through reputable impartial and honest organizations, while taking into account the Syrian regime's corruption and hegemony over the groups active in its territories and its long history of looting and stealing UN and other humanitarian aid since 2014, which effectively renders those affected in the regime's territories hostages.

4. The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC)
During his visit to Turkey, Martin Griffiths, the UN’s ERC, arrived late at Bab al-Hawa crossing with Syria. On his arrival, on February 12, six days after the earthquake, he apologized in a tweet to the Syrians in northwestern Syria, but failed to provide any answers as to why humanitarian aid was so late and so inadequate, making his Twitter apology meaningless. We, at SNHR, believe that such an apology should have been issued through the publication of a formal statement, rather than in the form of a tweet, and should have included a pledge to compensate the victims who died simply because of the shameful lateness and inadequacy of the UN’s aid response.

Furthermore, it is essential that the glaring dysfunction shown by the relevant UN agencies and other bodies over the past few days be addressed through an immediate redoubling of the aid coordination efforts among governments, inter-government organizations, and NGOs, while the UN should issue an urgent humanitarian distress call in response to the earthquake in northwestern Syria. As Chair of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, we call on the ERC to hold an emergency meeting to coordinate these efforts in the three areas affected by the earthquake - Turkey, northwestern Syria, and the areas under the Syrian regime’s control.

5. International Organization for Migration (IOM)

While its response was also woefully late and inadequate, the IOM’s response was better than that of the other agencies. The Organization deployed a 21-truck convoy on February 9, three days after the earthquake, from its warehouses to northwestern Syria, followed by a 35-truck convoy to support those worst affected and ease the suffering of the people most severely impacted by the ravages of the destruction on February 14.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- The late response by the UN that left local civil society organizations alone to deal with the horrors and catastrophic effects of the earthquake on their own has caused the preventable deaths of many more people under the rubble.

- The UN’s response has been wholly inadequate and in no way propionate to the vast magnitude of the disastrous effects of the earthquake in northwestern Syria. Some mechanisms put in place for responding to disasters were invoked late, while others were not invoked at all, such as issuing a distress call to mobilize efforts and teams from across the globe.

- The donor states’ almost complete reliance on UN agencies, even while fully being aware of their slowness and bureaucracy, means that those states share responsibility for the late humanitarian response. Efforts should be made towards establishing a platform dedicated to organizing and coordinating international support efforts.


10. Ibid.

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Recommendations to the UN and donor states

- The UN should launch an internal investigation into why earthquake-related humanitarian assistance arrived so late in northwestern Syria.

- The UNDAC must be deployed to northwestern Syria as soon as possible to save, rescue and retrieve whoever and whatever remains.

- The ISARAG must also be deployed to northwest Syria to respond to the overwhelming challenges faced by the residents there still suffering the effects of the earthquake.

- Allocate adequate and sufficient funds from the CERF to address the crisis situation in northwestern Syria.

- Abstain from using the concept of sovereignty as an excuse for inaction, and take action to redress the invocation of the Security Council’s arbitrary powers at the expense of international law, and especially humanitarian assistance.

- Establish an international support platform capable of handling the coordination of humanitarian assistance in northwestern Syria. Such a body would act as an additional option, in addition to the UN, rather than the current situation of leaving people in need of aid completely reliant on the UN, which has proven to be a miscalculation in light of Russia’s extortion of the UN over the past few years.

Acknowledgment and Condolences

We extend our most sincere and heartfelt gratitude to the families and activists who collaborated with us despite their difficult conditions. May the victims of the earthquake rest in peace. Our most heartfelt condolences go to their families and friends.