

Statement after the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria

Our heart goes out to all those affected by the devastating earthquakes on February 6th, that killed at least 7,108 people in Turkey and 2,530 in Syria¹, injured many more and led to the destruction of people's homes in the affected areas. Our thoughts are with our partners in the region who are grieving the loss of loved ones, and extend our sincerest condolences.

Survivors of the earthquakes are still outside of their homes, fearful of aftershocks that might bring cracked buildings to collapse. Northwest Syria has heavily suffered from over ten years of war with many buildings left damaged, and 3 million internally displaced people many of which already lived in makeshift shelters. After Monday's events, many tens of thousands more are displaced and without shelter in the midst of harsh weather conditions. Every second counts where people are still trapped underneath the rubble and awaiting much direly needed rescue. The Syria Civil Defense, also known as White Helmets, have been working tirelessly for more than 24 hours under the heavy rain and storms, but material support, including fuel, and assistance are needed to respond to the large-scale need. In some regions, rescuers work with no equipment to save lives. Meanwhile, many families are grieving for their lost loved ones or hoping for rescue in the cold, while bombardments by Pro-Assad forces and Syrian Democratic Forces continue in North Aleppo.

We stand with the calls by Syrian organizations and activists to the international community to take quick emergency measures, send material help and assistance, and grant humanitarian actors on the ground flexibility in the usage of earmarked funds for the crisis at hand. The support of civil engineers is needed to assess the remaining buildings to allow the safe return of its inhabitants. We also urge the international community to put pressure on the Assad Regime and its allies to stop the bombing in the affected areas. Furthermore, the international community may not allow the Assad Regime to manipulate emergency humanitarian aid to punish the population of the areas outside of its control in the Northwest by insisting that aid needs to go through Damascus (so-called "cross-line" aid). Assad has a record of obstructing aid from reaching areas outside its control. The only border-crossing into Northwest Syria used for UN humanitarian aid, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, has been closed since the earthquake due to destruction of its surrounding infrastructure. In the absence of a legal basis in international humanitarian law for Damascus-based aid², such a step would only slow down and hinder the aid that is needed as quickly as possible. Aid and rescue teams are not yet reaching many of the affected areas, both in Turkey and Syria. At the current point, governments should prioritize unilateral responses over the usage of the UN cross-border mechanism. It is of utmost importance to open additional border crossings and deliver emergency aid wherever possible. We also call upon the international community to strive for international search and rescue missions to fly into the affected areas and help the missing, injured and survivors. Last but not least, European governments who already have open resettlement files for Syrians in the affected areas should prioritize their resettlement immediately.

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/2/8/turkey-syria-earthquake-updates>

² https://www.crossborderislegal.org/_files/ugd/166212_22269a6fb394455f89a2f25d568c2819.pdf