

NESSL Update on the situation in Syria

Monday 13 February 2023

A week after the earthquake that struck the province of Kahramanmaras in south Turkey and reached the Syrian governorates of Aleppo, Latakia, Idlib, and Hama, the tragedy continues to affect a huge number of Syrian and Turkish people.

The death toll stands more than 34,000 people with more than 100,000 injuries while the United Nations speaks about 5.9 million people as homeless. The national media networks record 4,500 dead and more than 10,000 injured in both parts of Syria (The one controlled by the government and the rebel-held one) while the formal number declared by the Syrian government is 1,414 dead and 2349 injured.

Meanwhile, hope began to fade in the search for survivors after more than 130 hours of the big catastrophe and the windows of survival began to close. However, very few miraculous rescues happened within the last few hours.

A sad bit of news came to us this morning about the passing away of a 4 member presbyterian family from Aleppo who was in Antioch during the earthquake. Also, our elder from Banyaas Church (50 Km south of Latakia) reported some cracks in the chapel and Church apartment.



During the last five days, the already affected region has been hit by more than 100 aftershocks of magnitude 4 and more. These aftershocks caused more destruction in the buildings and created more fear in people. Syria recorded two earthquakes (4.6 magnitudes 40 Km to the north-west of Nabek city causing the falling of a building in the suburb of Damascus, and a magnitude 3.9 in the Mediterranean Sea 55 Km to the west of Latakia) that -most probably- were separated from the seismic activity in Turkey. Those two shocks raised the risk of re-activation of the seismic activity in the vertical fault that passes through Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria which is different from the Turkish fault that witnessed the huge earthquake on Monday morning.

In Syria, the “governmental engineering committees” started to check the buildings to evaluate their safety and ability to resist possible coming shocks. The damages vary from minor cracks that require simple repairing procedures to major cracks that require rapid evacuation. The number of evacuated buildings in Latakia city alone is about 50 buildings, however, the Latakia countryside was not yet submitted to engineering checkup. Spectators said that the damage is more than the one surrounding Aleppo.

Local sources speak about more than 70 buildings completely destroyed in Latakia’s governorate while hundreds of buildings are partly damaged.



Evacuated people are now hosted either by their relatives or in public shelters run by governmental organizations, Churches, NGOs, and religious charity associations. The estimated number of people in public shelters is 137,000 people according to a declaration by a cabinet member.

Some evacuated people could make it to travel to their relatives in more safe cities of Homs and Damascus, which made life even more difficult for them since hosting families can hardly afford their own livelihood because of rocketing prices and lack of fuel and heating.

Many vital main roads were closed in Aleppo because of major cracks that appeared in bridges threatening collapse. The difficulty of transportation among different governorates and between the cities and their countryside stood behind the postponement of the first-term exam in all Syrian universities, while all schools in Aleppo and Latakia are still closed till 16 February at least.

The number of damaged schools is 599 schools all over Syria. At the same time, many other schools are used as public shelters.

Humanitarian work and relief already started to take place through spontaneous untrained volunteering groups that tried to help as much as they can. Food, blankets, medicine, used heavy clothes, and diapers are being distributed. Still, the work is going randomly due to the absence of a unified national database that may organize the efforts.

Our two churches in Aleppo and Latakia are active in responding to the catastrophe by standing with affected people. Our Aleppo College opened its door to people to be sheltered. On the second

day, 600 people took refuge in the College to be offered food, clean water, blankets, medicine, hygiene, and clothes regardless.

It is a time for the Church to witness in action and Christian love.

Monday 20 February 2023

Two weeks after the devastating earthquake of 6th February 2023, the death toll passes 45,000. Turkey has witnessed the passing away of 39,672 people while the Syrian government and UN say that more than 5,800 people have been killed in Syria. Meanwhile, rescue operations have dwindled and focus has turned to relief work and attempts of recovery.

Last few days, Syrian cities were shocked by the sad news coming from Turkey about the passing away of Syrian families there. One death announcement declared the passing away of 11 people from one family.

The number of aftershocks that followed the main earthquake is 3,858 according to Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, most of them were harshly felt in the Syrian cities. On the night of Thursday 16th February, two heavy aftershocks were recorded (a magnitude 5.4 one 61 Km to the North-west of Idlib, and a magnitude 3.4 only 50 Km to the North-west of Latakia) causing several panic attacks and pushing people to spend the night in the streets again. All churches of Latakia (including the Presbyterian Church) opened their halls to host terrified people who spent the night outside their houses.

These heavy aftershocks caused more damage to buildings pushing the number of evacuated houses up. Meanwhile, the technical checking of buildings continued to take place revealing the urgent need for many buildings to be demolished as soon as possible. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent says that more than 276 buildings are on the ground and 325 buildings are partially damaged in the cities affected by the earthquake.



The Syrian ministry of Local Administration issued a list of the public shelters that are fully recognized by the government with 275 public shelters (235 in Aleppo, 32 in Latakia, 5 in Hama, 2 in Tartous, and 1 in Homs) while many other shelters run by NGO's were not counted in this list, making them dependent on local donations only and have limited access -in a sense- to international aids that started to enter the country. At the same time, the humanitarian work started to be more organized and a new mechanism to receive aid convoys was put. According to this mechanism, each governorate formed a relief committee to receive the aid convoys and redistribute it according to daily need reports sent by the public shelters' administrative bodies.

The catastrophic earthquake opened a door for more ecumenical work among different churches in both Aleppo and Latakia. The leaders of churches in those cities (including our three presbyterian pastors in Aleppo and Latakia) started to work on putting a post-relief policy that includes taking part in houses' restoration procedures. For that, engineering committees were formed to check the affected houses and evaluate the approximate costs of restoration.

NESSL churches in Aleppo, Latakia and Hama were and are still fully engaged in relief work after the catastrophe. The Presbyterian Church in Aleppo are fully committed to offering around 800-1500 meals to affected people in public shelters and in their partially damaged houses every day. In addition to that, it continues to distribute food parcels, baby bottles, blankets, and clothes to more than 500 families.



At the same time, The Presbyterian Church in Latakia showed a deep concern in standing with others amid this crisis by distributing clothes, food parcels, medicine, baby formula, and diapers to more than 200 families. The main issue that our society and our churches -in particular- are facing, is the difficulty to differentiate between those who are really affected by the earthquake and those who were previously and continually affected by devastating poverty, unemployment, and rocketing inflation whose catastrophic effects are not less than that of the earthquake.

However, our society needs somebody to light a candle amid the darkness and our churches show readiness to do so.

Prepared by: Preacher Khairallah Atallah
NESSL Committee on Medical and Social Services



National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon

P.O.Box 70890 Antelias - Lebanon

Tel: 00961 (0)4 525030 **Fax:** 00961 (0)4 411184

Email: nessl@synod-sl.org

Web: www.synod-sl.org