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Political strategies to prevent, prepare for, and face the consequences of natural disasters

Addendum to the report[1]
Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development
Rapporteur: Mr Simon MOUTQUIN, Belgium, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

1. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A

In paragraph 2, third sentence, replace the words "the more than 57 000 victims" with the following words:

"the likely 100 000 victims"

Amendment B

In paragraph 2, fourth sentence, replace the words "to the Syrian refugees in Türkiye" with the following words:

"to the displaced Turks and Syrians"

Amendment C

At the beginning of paragraph 4, replace the words "In anticipation of the donors' conference to address the needs of the earthquake-affected populations" with the following words:

"After the donors' conference and in anticipation of the reconstruction process, which will have to address the needs and the state of mental health of the earthquake-affected populations"

Amendment D

After paragraph 7, insert the following paragraph:

"The Assembly therefore calls on Türkiye to:

- continue the necessary efforts to preserve the pre-disaster social, economic and multicultural fabric during the reconstruction phase;

- continue to facilitate the intervention of international humanitarian organisations operating on Syrian territory from Türkiye, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2672;

- not renew the state of emergency at the end of the three months declared, and opt for a democratic approach to crisis management;

- provide a forum for consultation between international humanitarian organisations and national authorities in the event of disasters;

1. Addendum to report Doc. 15738, approved by the committee on 24 April 2023.

- set up a forum for consultation between national, local and regional authorities in the 11 provinces to be rebuilt so as to strengthen local democracy and organise reconstruction more effectively, without any party-political bias;

- reconsider the decision to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, the "Istanbul Convention")."

Amendment E

After paragraph 7, insert the following paragraph:

"The Assembly therefore calls on the other member States to:

- show their support for Türkiye and Syria by providing urgent, medium- and long-term technical and financial assistance;

- encourage visits by parliamentarians and representatives of national, regional and local authorities to the 11 devastated provinces in Türkiye to show support for residents, learn from the Turkish experience, step up twinnings between municipalities and strengthen cultural ties and exchanges between young Europeans."

Amendment F

Replace paragraph 8.1 with the following paragraph:

"co-ordinate their efforts at the United Nations with a view to opening the three border crossings between Türkiye and Syria for the passage of humanitarian aid, as five years ago;"

Amendment G

After paragraph 8.2, insert the following paragraph:

"take account of the role of international humanitarian organisations when preparing their national strategies for disaster risk reduction, so as to facilitate the deployment of such organisations in disaster regions;"

Amendment H

After paragraph 8, insert the following paragraph:

"In the light of the shared values that bind all Council of Europe member States and the active commitment to Europe of the Turkish youth, the Assembly encourages the European Commission and the Turkish authorities to resume negotiations on suspending the visa requirement for Turkish nationals. In this context, it once more invites the Turkish authorities to review their overly broad interpretation of anti-terror legislation."

Amendment I

In paragraph 9, first sentence, replace the word "healthy" with the following words:

"safe, clean, healthy and sustainable"

2. Proposed amendments to the draft recommendation

Amendment J

At the end of paragraph 6, add the following sentence:

"It calls on the Committee of Ministers to put the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment at the top of the agenda of the 4th Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe."

Amendment K

After paragraph 6, insert the following paragraph:

> *"The Assembly congratulates the European Commission on the speed and efficiency of the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism mobilised a few hours after the earthquake on 6 February 2023 and on the organisation of the donors' conference on 20 March 2023. In the light of the experience gathered on the ground and as proof of sincere co-operation with international humanitarian organisations, it invites the European Commission to consider introducing co-operation without intermediaries, including for funding, so as to facilitate such organisations' deployment in the emergency phase of extreme events."*

3. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Simon Moutquin, rapporteur

1. The earthquakes which hit Türkiye on 6 February 2023 were terrible. They were one of the worst natural disasters of the century and caused devastation in a Council of Europe member State and also in Syria. I visited Türkiye, which is part of the European family and has been a member of our Organisation since 1950. My primary aim was to pass on our support to the Turkish people who had seen towns and cities literally wiped off the map and share the grief of the relatives of the tens of thousands of victims. I also sought to gain an understanding of the disaster, which is hard to describe given how it went beyond anything that could be imagined. To honour the victims, we have a collective duty not to just forget the disaster but to learn from this extreme event and draw lessons from it that will be needed in the context of the Anthropocene era, given the increasing number and severity of disasters likely to occur in future.

2. I visited Türkiye from 3 to 7 April 2023. On this occasion, I exchanged views with representatives of the Turkish authorities, civil society and the international community in Ankara before travelling to Hatay. I was able to visit the towns of Samandağ, Defne, Antakya, Erzin and İskenderun in Hatay province and meet a large number of partners (some 30 people in total). I would like to thank the Turkish Grand National Assembly most sincerely for its valuable support in carrying out this ambitious programme.

3. The international partners I spoke to in Ankara kept on using the term "unprecedented." The destruction was so massive that observers found it difficult to contain their emotions. I was able to see for myself what they wanted to get over to me. Some told me of their other experiences in Haiti, the Philippines or Ukraine, while stressing the "unprecedented" situation and the need not to forget what had happened in Hatay and Adıyaman, the two hardest-hit provinces. With this addendum, I wish to alert the Parliamentary Assembly members to the gravity of the situation. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of buildings that have been destroyed, all public services, access to utilities, transport and commerce were brought to a halt. You have to have seen this with your own eyes to understand the magnitude of the problems facing the inhabitants in the 11 provinces affected by the earthquake. The country will need assistance. We must not look away when a member of the European family has suffered such terrible damage.

4. My report was initially not supposed to be devoted to Türkiye. This visit has brought home to me that the right to a healthy environment alone will not be enough to prepare us for the climate crisis and to arm us against the consequences of natural disasters. The disaster has undermined the feeling of safety, which is a precondition for well-being. We must value the feelings that bind us to places where we can put down roots. Tent cities are beginning to be replaced by portacabin cities. The first prefabricated dwellings have been built. Sustainable reconstruction plans are being drawn up. We must learn from this disaster. In our work at the Council of Europe, we will have to insist on the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. I was moved by the recognition expressed for my visit in all of my meetings in Ankara and in Hatay. I would now encourage parliamentarians and also mayors to go there and show their friendship and support, too. We must not abandon these people and leave room for frustration. Silence must not take hold because reconstruction will take years. Alongside support, we need to recreate hope. Mr Lütfü Savaş, Metropolitan mayor of Hatay, told us that the course of history had resumed and that the future was being prepared, even as he held more and more meetings in a transparent way in the tent that now serves as the headquarters of Hatay province.

3.1. Feedback from Türkiye

5. The earthquakes on 6 February 2023 are the worst natural disaster for a hundred years. They devastated an area the size of Austria. It is impossible to tell the number of victims. While the figures from the prosecution service stopped at 50 000 deaths, people we spoke to referred to 100 000 or even 200 000 deaths, with 3.3 million people displaced in the country and tens of thousands injured.

6. Lying in the heart of ancient Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent and at the end of the Silk Road, Antakya/Antioch is one of the oldest cities in the world: it is linked to the domestication of wheat and olives. It was the site of the first Olympics and its streets were the first in history to have lighting. The city, of which nothing remains, was on the UNESCO World Heritage list. In Antakya, 80% of the buildings have been destroyed. The remaining 20% are uninhabitable because they are close to ruins which are at risk of collapsing. It was the eighth time that the city had been destroyed by an earthquake. Yet the residents are particularly attached to their city and intend coming back. They realise that the wealth of their culture lies in the seven accumulated layers of civilisations because different ethnic groups and believers of many different religions have always lived there together.

7. While the immediate emergency has now passed, the humanitarian needs are still significant. A total of 2 to 3 million people are living in sordid conditions. After the tents, the survivors are waiting for portacabin and prefabricated buildings pending the reconstruction of their towns and cities. There has been large-scale international assistance and our discussion partners are grateful for the unbelievable efforts made. Over 100 countries provided assistance. The European Union's civil protection mechanism was activated successfully. Funding organisations, including the Council of Europe Development Bank, are doing their part. The donor conference released €6.05 billion. The needs are huge and are put at €106 billion. The stakeholders will have to come up to the challenge of reconstruction and also the need to ensure peace and calm in the region. The next two to three years will be particularly difficult for the most vulnerable and poorest groups.

8. The people I spoke to regularly stressed the terrible state of mental health of the residents who were still in Hatay.[2] Both adults and children are experiencing mood, sleep and appetite disorders. We were told that chronic illness was taking hold and was no longer just traumatic. This depressive context is a breeding ground for domestic violence, as was shown by the experience of the last three earthquakes. Parents are unable to find milk or food for babies. Pharmacies are lacking in basic products such as suncream and anti-lice treatments, which are not reimbursed by the health system. Cases of discrimination against Syrians, Roma[3] and LGBTQI+ people have been recorded. The fear of Nature and the paralysis caused by the disaster have prevented proper mourning. Yet people want to find their bearings again as quickly as possible.

9. The organisation of the emergency relief efforts is globally effective. In spite of an initial period of shock given the immensity of the disaster, both AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management presidency of the Turkish Ministry of the Interior) and the Red Crescent acted impressively in terms of the resources deployed. In the tent city which we visited, we saw offices of various public services, the Ministry of Agriculture and a notary, as well as a library and facilities for children. In Samandağ, AFAD is planning to build a portacabin settlement with the capacity to house 20 000 people. We must learn from how they have organised things and also from their mistakes. Some essential services such as telephone communication were restored very quickly. Welfare benefits have been provided online and in dedicated tents opened for people without Internet access. Some survivors were able to put up tents provided close to the ruins of their homes with the support of AFAD and the Red Crescent.

10. The disaster has had a long-term impact in terms of destabilising the Council of Europe member State with the largest population. All public services came to a halt, including the justice system. 17 500 lawyers were affected by the disaster, with 93% of them losing their homes or offices. Two bar associations are housed in tents. Those residents who were able to do so fled to safer areas, leaving only the poorest behind. While those displaced inside Türkiye were offered support in safe towns and cities, they caused an increase in road traffic and in rent levels, as well as greater competition on the labour market and for school places, accompanied by rising xenophobia, especially when they come from ethnic minorities. I am concerned about the coming elections, even if the Central Electoral Commission is optimistic. Against the background of economic crisis and high inflation which the country is already experiencing, Türkiye will need medium- and long-term assistance to overcome the consequences of the earthquake. It is also possible that, if not addressed properly, emigration will alter the balance between ethnic groups in the region, with potential geostrategic consequences throughout the Middle East.

11. Overcrowding and temporary housing conditions have made women and children more vulnerable. The Pikolo association, which we met, is doing outstanding work in a tent city of 250 families, but two months after the disaster and in spite of all the goodwill displayed, its capacities are still limited and other stakeholders are only just beginning to set up operations. It is offering support not only to children but also to parents who have lost everything. Many of the young people have developed disorders with symptoms involving anger

2. Euronews, 10 April 2023, Turquie: de nombreux rescapés du séisme souffrent de stress post-traumatique.
3. There is a particular presence of the Dom and Abdal communities in the earthquake zones.

management, a state of shock and difficulties in understanding the situation and in accepting the change in their circumstances. The stress built up during the acute phase is turning into a lack of hope in the current phase.

12. Apart from the physical changes affecting the landscape, the disaster is also causing a range of environmental problems. The logistics of dealing with debris are complex. Improvised dumps have, unfortunately, sprung up, damaging nature reserves, lakes and magnificent coastlines. More specifically, the issue of asbestos comes up frequently, triggering protests from local residents which are suppressed by the authorities. This situation leads us to consider the right to a clean environment, as well as the issues of drinking water, air quality, the state of water tables and the conservation of landscape and wildlife habitats, which we have not had time to address. I also note that concrete is 60% recyclable and can be used again in new buildings. We must take greater account of environmental protection in all phases of implementation of our strategies for disaster risk reduction.

13. On 7 February 2023, the Turkish authorities declared a three-month state of emergency in 11 of the country's 81 provinces. The decision was taken to facilitate emergency relief work. However, it would appear to have had a side-effect in terms of silencing protest. I regret the temporary suspension of social media, the reduction in bandwidth and the suppression of demonstrations held by opponents of wildcat asbestos dumps which I observed on the ground. Several people I spoke to wished to talk about the state of emergency for other reasons. As during the Covid-19 epidemic, there was a strong temptation to centralise power again. In a country that is already very centralised, all decisions are taken by central government authorities, leaving no room for discretion or action by local and regional authorities. As mentioned above, the metropolitan municipality of Hatay is nevertheless preparing reconstruction plans through wide-ranging consultation processes without waiting for the state of emergency to end and its powers to be restored. It is unfortunate that the state of emergency is also forcing civil society bodies to go through complex administrative procedures to obtain authorisations. Associations face administrative obstacles to carrying out their activities, especially in terms of gaining access to the border with Syria.

14. Since the earthquake in Haiti, we know how corruption kills. Although Türkiye has introduced very good anti-seismic legislation, there are problems with implementation. There is a hidden cost to circumvention of town planning rules, which may have led to many deaths. Nevertheless, some modern buildings which met the relevant standards were also destroyed by an earthquake of terrifying violence. On several occasions, I discussed the issue of the amnesties granted to the owners of properties built illegally.

15. In spite of our efforts, I was not able to visit any camps accommodating Syrians. I wish to pay tribute to the generosity of Türkiye, which has taken in huge numbers of people fleeing from war. These people have generally been well received and have contributed to the country's economy. 3.5 million Syrians have been living in Türkiye for 12 years. It should be noted that more than 50% of the Syrians living in Türkiye were in the area hit by the earthquake. Many have disappeared. The people we spoke to said that they may have decided to go home to help with relief efforts. However, some people also spoke of repatriation.

3.2. Feedback from Syria

16. I was not able to visit Syria myself. However, I was able to talk with members of the international and Turkish humanitarian teams.

17. The areas in the north-west of the country were also affected after the shock wave swept through Antakya. The cities of Jindires, Al Dana, Afrin, Idlib and Aleppo have been destroyed again. Poorly constructed buildings collapsed. In the chaos, children were separated from their parents for 50 days.

18. Cholera has continued to spread since September 2022, helped on by the earthquake. Médecins Sans Frontières has issued warnings about global vaccine shortages.[4]

19. While mental health has collapsed in the affected areas in Türkiye, suicide attempts are cruelly increasing in Syria. Women are more at risk because of the increasing number of attacks. There has been an upsurge in violence. One of the people we spoke to said that people in Syria were losing hope. Another said that they had lost all faith in life. Children were suffering from terrible trauma while artillery bombardment continued.

4. MSF Infos, No. 213, March 2023.

20. The opening of the last border crossing from Hatay province to Bab-al Hawa, which was authorised by the UN Security Council in July 2022 for six months and has already been extended once, has provided some respite by allowing the passage of humanitarian aid. However, five years ago, there were still three border crossings between Türkiye and Syria. Access to Syrian territory is problematic.

3.3. Learning from a disaster of the century

21. In the run-up to the 4th Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, this disaster is a stark reminder of the need to consolidate our environmental resilience. Natural disasters are not a toll demanded by nature. Especially against the background of the looming climate crisis, we have a duty to begin thinking about our vulnerabilities and to make Europe a stable place of well-being with a high level of protection of the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The issue of environmental rights must be among the very top priorities of the Reykjavik Summit. I put forward four points in my report, which I have renewed here. We must also afford nature-centred instruments the place they deserve in human rights protection mechanisms. In preparing this addendum, I also wanted to share various ideas addressed to all member States and to the European Union.

22. With regard to major hazards, I would once again stress the need for all member States to draw up national strategies for disaster risk reduction geared towards prevention, preparedness, coping and reconstruction. These strategies should include various scenarios so as to leave no room for paralysis.[5] In the Anthropocene era, no member State can do without such preparedness.

23. In addition to public bodies, the strategies must be aimed at the beneficiaries and, especially, volunteers and civil society partners. Self-help is an essential part of resilience. It needs to be boosted so as to guide all individuals in their behaviour and thereby limit the harmful consequences of extreme events. Self-help must be learnt from early childhood. I note that the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe published its first thematic report entitled “Pandemics and natural disasters as reflected in history teaching”.[6]

24. The natural disaster which hit Türkiye was terrible. Two months later, it is vital to keep on talking about it and not to forget. I wish to thank the Turkish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for the photo exhibition and the public event held during the second 2023 part-session.

25. One point I would highlight from my discussions is the need, during post-disaster reconstruction, to allocate sufficient resources to restoring and preserving the social, economic and cultural fabric that existed before the disaster. The renovation of cultural heritage is particularly effective in restoring communities’ reference points and hence also in improving resilience and mental health while fostering the return of displaced persons.

26. Thanks to international solidarity, peer-to-peer co-operation made up for some shortcomings on the part of the Turkish authorities following a legitimate phase of shock. The efforts saved many people who had been buried alive. Volunteers came from everywhere, sometimes without proper co-ordination. It is also necessary to look at the co-operation between central government and non-governmental organisations that intervene in emergencies. In Türkiye and elsewhere, direct consultation channels need to be established so as to optimise their operations on the ground during the emergency phase (the first 10 days). This comment applies in particular to the European Union, which would do well to review its co-operation with international humanitarian organisations by providing direct co-ordination and funding in emergency situations itself.

27. In addition to the right to a safe environment, I would also stress the need for the right to a clean environment. Against the background of such a terrible disaster, particularly careful attention needs to be paid to the management of debris. We must incorporate environmental protection in all phases of our responses to disasters. I wish us to return to the initial wording from my report and call for the protection of the right to a safe, healthy, clean and sustainable environment.

28. The disaster revealed the failure of Turkish town planning policy. Opting for high-rise properties of more than three storeys was a mistake, in particular in the areas most at risk of earthquakes. I would also call on the national authorities to lift the state of emergency and give local authorities a greater role and broader powers with a view to rebuilding the region. I encourage them to set up a forum for consultation between national, local and regional authorities in the 11 provinces to be rebuilt so as to strengthen local democracy

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5. The AFAD official told us that the cities that were supposed to be on the front line of emergency responses had also been devastated by the disaster and could not provide the expected assistance. In the emergency situation, responses had been delayed at the expense of lives which it had not been possible to save.
6. Observatory of History Teaching in Europe, Pandemics and natural disasters as reflected in history teaching.

and organise reconstruction more effectively, without any party-political bias. During the reconstruction phase, striking a balance between the physical challenges and people's expectations in terms of their well-being is a demanding goal. Consultation is provided for in Article 4, paragraph 6, of the Council of Europe European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122).

29. The shock caused by the disaster may have altered people's trust in the authorities. I particularly encourage the Turkish authorities to ensure greater transparency and accountability. Essential services (schools, justice, health, utilities, etc.) need to be restored as quickly as possible. Among the risks that might materialise, I would highlight a possible decline in the schooling of girls which is to be feared. The lawyers' association referred to the reports by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and also placed emphasis on access to justice, which was being increasingly undermined as a result of the earthquake. There is a risk of delaying compliance with the law. Consideration also needs to be given to the regulation of amnesties in the context of a strategy for disaster risk reduction geared towards prevention, preparedness, coping and reconstruction. They may have shocked the public, especially since there are risks of earthquakes in other regions in the country. I encourage the Turkish authorities to continue their efforts to protect the most vulnerable groups, in particular women and children. In this context, I stress the need to reconsider the Turkish government's regrettable decision to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, the "Istanbul Convention"), of which Türkiye was one of the initiators. Any strategy to combat discrimination and racism should take account of the very precarious situation of Syrian residents, ethnic minorities and all vulnerable groups. Türkiye could thus be a model of preparedness for extreme events, given that the country has already had an "earthquake tax" for over 20 years.

4. Conclusion

30. Above all, this visit was a display of support and friendship, which could be compared to a visit to a family member in mourning. Before leaving, I had the opportunity to exchange views with the rapporteurs of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on "Local and regional responses to major crises: between emergency responses and post-crisis reconstruction."[7] I applaud their decision to travel to Türkiye in the autumn and call on parliamentarians and mayors also to visit the country to see the situation for themselves.

31. I note that the resources available do not meet the expectations of the donor conference as described in the assessment and reconstruction plan.[8] It is unfortunate that the funding is not reaching the beneficiaries more quickly because of the highly centralised nature of the country. Fatigue can also be observed in the support provided by private foundations. I will therefore insist on renewing a call for support in the reconstruction phases in the devastated provinces.

32. I would like to take the opportunity to reassure the youth of Türkiye, who are no different in their tastes and civic behaviour than any other young people in Europe. They have already chosen Europe, their Europe, and I extend my friendship to them. We must not reject them. I sincerely hope that cultural exchanges can be stepped up, and pass on their expectations to the Assembly and the member States.

33. The residents of the towns and cities affected by the disaster must not be forgotten during the reconstruction phase that is now beginning. More exchanges will be beneficial for their mental health. Elected representatives and municipal employees will need the experience and support of their peers. As suggested by Mr İzzetin Yılmaz,[9] I therefore call on mayors to step up twinnings between the towns and regions affected and other European towns and cities and to increase the number of exchanges, which are beneficial for all.

34. Lastly, as a sign of recognition for the youth of Türkiye, who have chosen Europe, I ask the European Union to resume negotiations on suspending the visa requirement for Turkish nationals, as is already the practice between most Council of Europe member States.

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7. Mr Christian Debève (France, R, ILDG) and Mr Jean-Paul Bastin (Belgium, L, EPP-CCE).
8. Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment – T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı – SBB.
9. The Mayor of Antakya.