

Earthquake in Turkey and Syria: urgent measures needed to support people with disabilities

"Our thoughts are with our Turkish and Syrian colleagues and all those affected by this tragedy. We call on humanitarian actors to ensure equal access to aid for people with disabilities and other people most at risk. Additional measures to address the specific needs of people with disabilities must be taken immediately."

It is the statement and at the same time appeal of Ioannis Vardakastanis, president of ESAMEA, in his capacity as the president of both IDA (International Disability Alliance) and EDF (European Disability Forum), in the joint press release issued by the aforementioned organizations together with the Arab Organization of Persons with Disabilities and the Confederation of Persons with Disabilities in Turkey, for the enormous needs of disabled people and their families in Turkey and Syria following the devastating earthquake of February 6.

As the devastation of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria continues to unfold, organizations of people with disabilities and their families are calling on the governments of Turkey and Syria, the European Union, humanitarian organizations and other countries to support the protection and safety of people with a disability, to comply with their obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in particular Article 11 on situations of danger and humanitarian emergencies, as well as under other relevant standards and guidelines, in particular the IASC: Guidelines for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action. More than 40,000 people have already lost their lives, hundreds of thousands are injured and millions of people are in need of emergency assistance in the aftermath of the 6 February 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. No data are available on the number of victims among people with disabilities. However, it is known that in all humanitarian crises people with disabilities face a two to four times higher risk of death compared to the rest of the population, are more likely to experience discrimination and exclusion when receiving life-saving assistance such as health care, and are at greater risk of violence and abuse. Those who develop physical or psychosocial disabilities as a result of the earthquake need urgent support and services but are often neglected. Women and girls with disabilities are at greater risk of physical, sexual and other forms of violence, exploitation and harassment.

According to disability organizations in Turkey, the emergency response so far has not been comprehensive and accessible. Mustafa Özsaygı, president of the Confederation of People with Disabilities in Turkey said: “Our cities, which had accessibility problems for people with disabilities before the earthquakes, have now become inaccessible for the entire population of the region. It is inevitable that millions of earthquake victims will suffer injuries that lead to long-term disabilities. The confusion and disorganization seen in the first ten days of the earthquakes showed us once again that disaster preparedness is not enough for millions of people and people with disabilities, including migrants and refugees living in the disaster-affected region. We call on the government to actively support civil society organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities to overcome this situation and prepare for future disasters.”

One of the world's most complex humanitarian crises has already claimed thousands of lives and left millions displaced in Syria over the past decade. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the February 6 earthquake affected more than 8.8 million people across Syria. Thousands of homes, health care facilities and schools were destroyed and many people face significant challenges in terms of access to drinking water, protection and food. A major barrier to supporting people affected in Syria is the lack of adequate humanitarian access. This means that already scarce resources are not reaching the affected Syrian areas. Snowstorms and freezing temperatures, combined with a lack of essential infrastructure, including transport, mean that millions of Syrians have not received basic support more than a week after the earthquake.

“I can safely say that since the crisis in Syria began in 2011, people with disabilities have been left alone to deal with displacement, war and lack of healthcare. The infrastructure was not accessible and the social security system was not strong even before 2011. But what was there was destroyed in the last ten years. This earthquake has unfortunately affected disabled people in Syria and refugees in Turkey in the worst way,” said Nawaf Kabara, president of the Arab Organization of Disabled Persons.

As organizations representing persons with disabilities and their families at global, regional and national levels, they call on all actors to safeguard the lives and rights of persons with disabilities by:

- Ensuring the meaningful participation of representative organizations of persons with disabilities and their families in the planning and implementation of emergency response

- Ensuring that persons with disabilities are included without discrimination in all search and rescue and needs assessment processes Guarantee comprehensive and accessible emergency response services, including accessible information and points of contact, transportation, shelter and health care
- Guarantee that all assistance provided, including financial assistance, includes persons with disabilities
- Ensuring that specific goods and services required by different groups of people with disabilities, including hygiene items, assistive devices, sign language interpretation in national sign languages and psychosocial support are included in the list of urgent priorities for distribution. In no case should this additional support required cause segregation or institutionalization of disabled people.

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