
Earthquake hits Turkey and Syria. Fr Bahjat (parish priest in Aleppo): "A devastating tragedy, do not abandon us"

A 7.8-magnitude earthquake hit southern Turkey and central and northwestern Syria this morning at 4.17 a.m. local time (2.17 a.m. in Italy). Massive damage was reported throughout the affected areas. Hundreds of people have been killed and injured in both countries, and the toll is expected to rise. A total of 1,710 buildings collapsed in ten provinces in south-eastern Anatolia, with Gaziantep and Kahramanmaraş the worst affected, according to the preliminary toll released by Turkey's Vice-President Fuat Oktay. At least 284 people were reported dead with 2,232 injured. Over 230 people were killed and 600 wounded in Syria, most of them in Hama, Aleppo and Latakia, but the death toll is expected to rise and casualties are mounting by the hour. Syria's government agency Sana reported that Syrian President Bashar al Assad convened an emergency meeting in Damascus this morning to coordinate relief efforts. Bad weather in the earthquake-affected areas are likely to hamper rescue and recovery operations. **Witness accounts.** "There are huge piles of rubble all around. At least 36 buildings were completely destroyed trapping people under the rubble, according to the first reports from the area. Also our Latin parish church where I serve has been damaged, but no further damages have been reported so far," Father **Bahjat Elia Karakach**, friar of the Custody of the Holy Land and Latin parish priest in Aleppo, told SIR reporting on the aftermath of the 4.17 a.m. earthquake. "There was a terrible tremor," said the parish priest, his voice filled with exhaustion, "people took to the streets in panic, those who managed to make it. Many, as I said, were trapped under the rubble. It has been raining and the weather is cold, I saw people fleeing barefoot and wearing light clothing, in pyjamas, looking for a safe shelter. We opened the non-damaged parish facilities and offered them warm drinks and something to eat. We also prayed to ask for God's protection. Now, at the crack of dawn, displaced people are returning to their homes to assess the damage. There is no electricity, it's a tragic situation. Everyone is waiting for relief and rescue operations - right now, the priority is to try to save as many lives as possible by pulling them out of the rubble." Deaths and destruction were also reported in the area of Idlib, which is not controlled by Assad's regime. Father **Hanna Jallouf**, parish priest of Knaye, one of three Christian villages in the Orontes Valley, besides Yacoubieh and Gidaideh, reported on the situation to SIR. Although Father Jallouf is still in Damascus, he collected the testimony of his confrere, Father **Louai Sbai**, who remained in Knaye, only 50 km from Idlib: "Extensive damage was reported in the villages in northern Syria, in the area of Idlib, where many people were killed and wounded - Father Sbai was reported by Father Hanna as saying -. Our communities appear to be safe, only structural damage was reported. First responders are arriving, but the local population is checking to see if their homes are in good condition and take whatever they can. Estimating the damage now is difficult if not impossible because of the massive scale of destruction." **The appeal.** "We are counting on international assistance, here we are all in shock at what has happened. As if the war was not enough, the poverty was not enough, now this earthquake", said Father Bahjat, making an appeal to the international community: " please lift or suspend the sanctions on Syria at least to allow and facilitate the arrival and transportation of humanitarian aid that is so badly needed. So many people had just started to repair their homes destroyed by the war, and now they are stranded again, all they can salvage is rubble. This is a tremendous tragedy, please do not abandon the Syrian people."

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