

Statement from the Internationalist Commune of Rojava on the earthquake in Kurdistan, Syria and Turkey

Internationalist Commune of Rojava

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A natural disaster, inseparable from its political implications

From the Internationalist Commune of Rojava we are extremely touched by the tragedy of this earthquake. Our thoughts are with all the families who have been hit hard, whatever their origin. Where we are, we have felt the earth shake, but without the dramatic consequences that other regions are experiencing. If borders mark lines that are sometimes unbridgeable, the connection between people is not. Here, in the north-east of Syria/Western Kurdistan (Rojava), there are thousands of people who have a strong relationship with others elsewhere in the country, but also especially with the people of southern Turkey/Northern Kurdistan (Bakûr).

We believe that emotions should not make us forget to take a political look at the situation. What is happening today is not a natural event disconnected from the way society is organised, with nationalist and racist fault lines dividing peoples, with a capitalist economy that favours profit over well-being, with nation-state policies guided by short-termism and electoralism. Many voices are being raised at the moment to appeal to feelings of solidarity, to universalist values. We support these appeals, but we do not accept to put aside the socio-political context in which these events are taking place. Past, present and future responsibilities cannot be erased under the guise of a humanist vision that has never existed in the eyes of political regimes in the nation-states of the region and the rest of the world. The mainstream media is rightly moved by the situation, but the same media was silent not long ago about the suffering of these same people and will probably be silent again in a few weeks.

• Geographical and political context

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake that took place during the night of February 5-6 has already claimed more than 12,000 victims and unfortunately this number is likely to increase significantly in the coming hours. The most affected regions are mainly Kurdish populated areas on both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border. Historically neglected and oppressed by Ankara (such as in Maraş), under Turkish and Islamist extremist occupation in northern Syria (such as in Afrin), having experienced Assad's brutal repression (such as in Aleppo) or currently living under Turkish bombing (such as in Tel Rifaat). In addition, there are thousands of

refugees who have fled the numerous fights that have destabilized the region for decades. This catastrophe is therefore all the more acute as the populations have been experiencing economic and political difficulties for a long time.

The current majority media treatment is another glaring example of the invisibilization of the Kurdish people. Few media outlets have taken the trouble to point out which peoples live in the affected regions. The idea is not at all to make this natural disaster identity-based, as nature does not make cultural distinctions, but rather to keep it linked to a human and historical reality which alone allows us to really understand the ordeals that people are going through. A real solidarity can only exist by taking into consideration the ins and outs of this reality.

- **Anything but a surprise and much more than a natural disaster**

This earthquake is far from being the first to hit the region. The region is at the crossroads of three tectonic plates, which makes it a place prone to earthquakes (for example, Turkey has experienced no less than 230 earthquakes exceeding a magnitude of 6 during the twentieth century, 12 of them exceeding a thousand victims). Historically, there have been many disasters, the most recent of which was in 1999 and resulted in almost 20,000 deaths. Being aware of this reality allows us to realize that the current regime has done everything but carry out a preventive policy in this matter, despite the important European aid provided for adapted urban plans. For years now, specialists in seismology have been warning about the imminent risk of dangerous plate movements without the government reacting.

This is all the more scandalous when one knows the close links that unite the AKP party and Erdogan himself with the construction sector, as well as the more paraonic projects that have been carried out since his accession to power. The cases of corruption are innumerable (both in terms of public/private contracts and the use of poor quality materials and non-compliance with standards), opponents of these projects and journalists who have tried to shed light on these cases are languishing in prison by the dozen. The Gezi Park protests in Istanbul are an example that involved large sectors opposed to urban gentrification, mega-projects and environmental destruction. They illustrate the damage of an economic

policy focused on increasing consumption and centralizing urbanization that does not take into account popular aspirations and creates a social divide.

In the Syrian regions, the destabilization and the after-effects of years of war are still very much alive. The regime in Damascus, with different international allies than Ankara, has nonetheless proven, over the last decade, to be ready to do anything to stay in power. If the Rojava autonomy experiment is tolerated, it is only because of the strength, determination and sacrifices it has shown.

- **Aid ineffectiveness and repression of subversive voices** As illustrated by countless testimonies (shared through social-medias and contrary to the Turkish government propaganda many areas are abandoned to their fate. In many places (such as Gaziantep) no aid had arrived in the crucial 12 hours following the earthquake. The ineffectiveness of the aid provided is partly structural, voluntary and due to the geopolitical context. Today, on Turkish social networks, the number of comments calling for a lack of interest in the death of Kurdish people, including young children, is chilling. The Turkish government has already issued clear threats that any criticism of the measures taken would be considered a form of treason and would be suppressed (a hotline has been set up to report such 'subversive' acts). The criminalization of the opposition, which has been going on for years, will only be increased by a desperate regime that reinforces a discourse of so-called unity that is in reality an exacerbated authoritarianism: *'if you criticize, you are against us and therefore against the nation'*. A few hours ago twitter was simply closed in Turkey.

In Syria, among the areas most affected are the ones under Turkish occupation and in the hands of Islamist mercenaries. This implies a local disorganization and an increased difficulty to send aid. The AANES has announced that it wants to provide aid to the areas adjacent to those it administers, while the Assad regime wants to monopolize international aid. The embargo situation in Rojava is an element that is all the more felt in these moments. The Turkish army does not seem to have decided to observe any truce despite the disaster. The region of Tel Rifaat, hit by the earthquake, has, for example, been bombed again last night (Tuesday, February 7).

- **Instrumentalization and invisibilization versus self-organization and internationalism**

The priority is of course the emergency relief. However, it is already necessary to be attentive to the way in which this catastrophe will be used for the upcoming elections (next May) but also to see what lessons will be drawn from it. When such a disaster occurs, the wounds and needs do not disappear along with the media attention. Lives and homes are destroyed, reconstruction is a long-term process that goes beyond concrete alone but should involve prevention and building local capacity to respond to such earthquakes.

It is likely that Erdogan and Assad are already making plans to try to take advantage of this in one way or another (such as the increased criminalization of opposition parties, like the HDP). It is likely that this will be done in line with a national unity that is only a facade to preserve their power at the expense of the people's interests. The first signs suggest that this will unfortunately not have a calming effect on the war and repressive aims of regimes that can only hold on because of it. If today's situation requires a rapid and unilateral reaction, this spontaneous solidarity must not be diluted as quickly as it is manifested, leaving free rein to policies that have had catastrophic effects on the lives of the majority of the populations now so severely affected.

We believe that this earthquake is symptomatic in many ways of the deleterious effects of the paradigm of the nation-state, which is the enemy of local autonomy and decentralized self-organization, of a capitalism that never seeks the long-term well-being of the people but feeds on crises and conflicts. The region that is so badly affected today is also the place where an authentically democratic political model has been tenaciously built for a decade. This model is a threat to the powers that be, which is why it is being attacked from all sides.

Today, as the Autonomous Administration does, we want solidarity to be expressed everywhere and in a concrete way. Tomorrow, when the emotion will have subsided and the cameras will have moved away, we hope that the women and men who live in this region of the world will not be forgotten. This depends on each one of us, this is the essence of the internationalism that inhabits us and knows no borders. To help now to alleviate the emergency is indispensable, to weave authentic bonds of internationalist solidarity for the future is vital.

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