

Six days in Southern Turkey after the Earthquake – A Personal Reflection

Dr. Suleiman Al Dakhoul, *MBBS MSc*

Registrar in Paediatrics, Harrogate general hospital, Lancaster park road, Harrogate, UK

Correspondence: suleiman.aldakhoul@nhs.net

The US Geological Survey (USGS) reported a M7.8 and M7.5 Earthquake Sequence struck near Nurdağı, Turkey (Türkiye) on February 6, 2023. The earthquake and its aftershocks affected many regions in southern Turkey and Northwest Syria, leading to a death toll that surpassed 50,000 in total (Reuters).

The scale of destruction and the rapidly-increasing number of victims shocked me. The affected areas were home to many disadvantaged Syrian refugees who fled and were displaced multiple times in war-torn Syria before they could finally find peace. The earthquake only added to their misery and suffering.

I did not have to overthink, and I quickly decided to use what was left of my annual leave to visit the affected areas. I knew the demographics well with few friends and contacts on the ground. In addition, I had the advantage of being bilingual (I speak both English and Arabic), which made communication much more straightforward.

I started crowdfunding on Justgiving.com and raised more than £2,000 only one week after launching my page. The support I had from friends, family, and colleagues was overwhelming.

In the first week following the earthquake, the situation on the ground was chaotic and unclear, especially for foreign observers. Planning the flight in such circumstances was challenging. The Turkish Emergency Services (AFAD) declared many airports out of service and unsafe for landing. Others were made available for international aid only and not commercial flights. Finding somewhere to stay was also problematic. The earthquake destroyed many hotels, and the Turkish authorities used the less damaged ones to provide shelter for locals.

Kayseri is a large industrial city in mainland Anatolia. The earthquake did not severely hit the city; its airport was still functioning and open to commercial flights. With the help and guidance of a few friends, I chose Kayseri to start my journey.



First, I rented a car to travel from Kayseri to Kahramanmaraş. Then, we bought sleeping bags, extra food and medicines to take with us. The support I had from locals in Kayseri was beyond imagination: people had very little, but they were donating a lot to take with

me. In addition, business owners offered us generous discounts when we told them the items would help homeless people in the affected areas.



In Marash, as soon as we arrived, we started exploring and scouting the area driving around looking for anyone who needed help. Unfortunately, as it was only six days after the earthquake, many survivors received little support from the government. Instead, priority was given to people still trapped under collapsed buildings, and much of the international help did not arrive by then.

Some people had no shelter, while others were taking turns sleeping overnight as what they had could not fit the entire family. This was when the early morning temperatures in Marash would drop below -5°C . The government had to cut the gas and electricity supply to the city amid concerns about pipeline damage and the risk of explosions.



I admitted three children to the hospital: a baby with bronchiolitis, an infant with a severe mucosal fungal infection, and a child with a leg abscess. However, I managed to treat many others without hospital admissions.

I took three packs of bread to one family. They took two and returned one because two were enough. Then, they asked me to give the third to another needy family. I witnessed and experienced many altruistic and courageous behaviours that were inspiring and demonstrated the very best of humanity. Those who suffered displayed empathy with others even though their own circumstances were dire. I cannot wait to go back to go through this rewarding and enriching journey again and be inspired by the work that people on the ground are doing for another. So, please, visit my page on justgiving.com and donate generously.

References

1. <https://www.usgs.gov/news/featured-story/m78-and-m75-kahramanmaras-earthquake-sequence-near-nurdagi-turkey-turkiye> (accessed 01/03/23)
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/earthquake-death-toll-surpasses-50000-turkey-syria-2023-02-24/> (accessed 01/03/23)
3. https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/suleiman-earthquake?utm_term=9V56JbzBX