Bulgaria external relations briefing:
The Bulgarian State and Society Stand in Solidarity with Turkey and Syria after the Devastating Earthquake
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Summary

On February 6, 2023, a catastrophic and destructive 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck southern and central Turkey, as well as northern and western Syria. A second earthquake of magnitude 7.7 occurred nine hours later. The two earthquakes caused enormous damage and tens of thousands of victims. In the first three days after the earthquake, Bulgarian institutions and private initiatives organized campaigns to help the victims of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, providing nearly EUR 1 million and sending several dozen rescue teams. The Bulgarian state sent several military planes loaded with aid for the victims, as well as rescue and emergency teams. 78 employees of the "Fire Safety and Protection of the Population" Department, 12 rescuers and 5 dogs from the "Mountain Rescue Service", as well as medics from the Emergency Center were sent to the most affected areas. In the following days, numerous campaigns were organized in Bulgaria to collect funds and humanitarian aid and to send them to the people in need. The Bulgarian government and society showed extraordinary mobilization in solidarity with the population of neighboring Turkey, as well as with that of Syria.

A devastating earthquake of 7.8 on the Richter scale hit Southern Turkey and northern Syria in the early hours of 6 February (4.17 a.m.). Many aftershocks followed the earthquake and a second major earthquake hit the region after 9 hours with 7.5 magnitude causing serious further damage and destruction of damaged buildings.

The two earthquakes caused enormous damage and tens of thousands of victims. This is the strongest earthquake in Turkey for the last 100 years. At the same time, it is one of the deadliest earthquakes for both Turkey and Syria. According to experts, it is the deadliest earthquake in the world since the earthquake in Haiti in 2010.

European Disaster Management Commissioner Janez Lenarčič said on Twitter that the European Commission had activated the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. “The EU’s Emergency Response Coordination Centre is coordinating the deployment of rescue teams from Europe,” Lenarčič said.¹

¹ https://sofiaglobe.com/2023/02/06/bulgaria-sending-emergency-team-to-turkiye-to-help-after-devastating-earthquakes/
Bulgaria was amongst the first countries to respond to the disaster. According to the Turkish ambassador to Bulgaria, Aylin Sekizkök, the country was the second to offer help, after Azerbaijan.\(^2\)

The Bulgarian government and society reacted extremely quickly and showed mobilization showing solidarity to the population of neighboring Turkey, as well as to that of Syria, which was also affected.

Early morning on February 6th Bulgaria sent 73 rescuers, over 30 units of specialized equipment to clean up the consequences of the severe earthquake, 5 dogs from the Bulgarian Red Cross, so the government together with the capital municipality, the Bulgarian Red Cross responded in a flash to provide the necessary help and support in rescuing the survivors of the earthquake.

The teams of the Emergency Directorate of the Metropolitan Municipality consisted of 16 people from the unit, equipped with specialized search and rescue equipment, were part of the Bulgarian rescue team that left Bulgaria with the two "Spartan" planes of the Ministry of Defense to help the victims of the devastating earthquake in Turkey.

The teams had 2 emergency rescue vehicles with trailers and the necessary equipment for carrying out rescue activities - thermal cameras, vibration camera, drone with thermal camera, telescopic search camera with the possibility of direct contact with the victims etc.

The Bulgarian rescue team included also employees of the "Emergency Assistance and Prevention" Department of the Sofia Municipality, the Department "Fire Safety and Protection of the Population" as well as doctors from the Bulgarian Military Medical Academy.\(^3\)

A few hours later, firefighters and rescuers from different cities in Bulgaria immediately left for Turkey by vehicles. The column of specialized equipment traveled to the site of the accident, about 1,800 km, on its own.\(^4\) On the very first day, more than 20 cars and more than 60 people drove to the area affected by the earthquake.\(^5\)

Various Bulgarian institutions, voluntary organizations and citizens initiated numerous campaigns in support of the victims of the earthquake in Turkey in less than 24 hours after the disaster, which took the lives of thousands of people. In hours, hundreds of blankets, gloves, jackets, scarves, hats, first aid kits and essential goods have been collected, which were among the most needed.

\(^2\) https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/turciia-prezhiiva-nebivalo-bedstvie-imame-nuzhda-ot-podkrepa-6161001
\(^3\) https://www.novinite.com/articles/218744/Bulgaria+expects+a+List+from+Turkey+with+the+Humanitarian+Assistance
\(^4\) https://news.bg/politics/izprashtame-dva-samoleta-spartan-i-spasitelni-ekipi-v-turciia.html
On the same day, the Bulgarian Air Force performed two more flights to transport rescuers, medical specialists from the Military Medical Academy and equipment to search for survivors of the devastating earthquake.6

On February 8, the European Commission notified the Bulgarian government of the activation of the Civil Protection Mechanism at the request of Syria for humanitarian assistance. The Bulgarian caretaker government has been already actively working to secure humanitarian aid and organize delivery corridors. However, due to difficulties with air delivery to Syria, alternative routes were being discussed.7

Meanwhile, UNICEF Bulgaria also conducted a fundraising campaign to help the victims of the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

On the same day, another plane "Spartan" from the Bulgarian Air Force was sent to Turkey with 20 employees of the General Directorate "Fire Safety and Protection of the Population". They also joined the rescue operations.8

A week later, the teams involved in rescue operations in Turkey were rotated. With new flights of the Bulgarian Air Force, humanitarian aid was also delivered to the victims of the earthquake in Turkey. The aid was from the Bulgarian Red Cross - blankets, pillows, bedding sets for 1,000 people, as well as warm clothes and hygiene materials, collected during the national campaign of the Bulgarian Red Cross in support of the victims of the disaster.

About 1 million euros were collected within the framework of the National campaign to help the victims of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, organized by the Bulgarian Red Cross.

Of the collected funds, 240,000 euros were transferred to Turkey, and 160,000 euros to Syria.9

In parallel with the help provided by the Bulgarian state institutions throughout Bulgaria, numerous private organizations started campaigns to help the victims. The National Association of Volunteers in Bulgaria sent nearly 50 rescuers to participate in the search for survivors in Turkey, and many material and financial donations were collected.10

On February 15, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted a Decision on the free provision of humanitarian aid to Turkey and Syria.

In connection with the international humanitarian aid requested by the government of the Republic of Turkey, under the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism with messages

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6 https://www.mod.bg/bg/news.php?&fn_page=3
7 https://m.offnews.bg/news/Obshtestvo_4/Pravitelstvoto-gotvi-humanitarna-pomosht-za-Siriia_795170.html
8 https://www.mod.bg/bg/news.php?&fn_page=3
10 https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32263623.html
from the ERCC (Emergency Response Coordination Centre), humanitarian aid is provided to the country, as follows:

The humanitarian aid is worth BGN 1,599,569.84 and includes tents, folding tables, benches and styles of mobile air conditioners, bedspreads, blankets, pillows, sheets and disposable covers, blanket bags, camping beds, thermal blankets. The aid also includes vans for housing needs of various sizes.

Humanitarian aid worth BGN 90,294.24 is provided to Syria and includes: tents, blankets, sets of underwear, covers.

In accordance with the activated Civil Protection Mechanism of the European Union, the free humanitarian aid will be transported with financial assistance from the European Commission.11

On February 19, in a telephone conversation with the Head of State Rumen Radev, Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed his gratitude for Bulgaria's support in the rescue operations after the two extremely strong earthquakes in Turkey.12

The Ambassador of Turkey to Bulgaria, Aylin Sekizkök, also expressed gratitude to the Bulgarian state, stating that:

"Until now we have addressed you as neighbors, friends. We now address you as brothers and sisters. You responded in the first hours after the tragedy and sent your rescue teams with military planes, which pulled many people out from under the ruins. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, this was the strongest gesture of solidarity that Bulgaria showed us. I am proud to be an ambassador to such a country," said Ambassador Sekizkök.13

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13 https://dariknews.bg/novini/bulgariia/turciia-s-ogromna-priznatelnost-i-blagodarnost-kym-bulgariia-2339775
Conclusion

The number of people killed by the earthquakes that struck Turkey and Syria earlier this month has now passed 50,000, according to the latest figures from both countries.

In Turkey alone, 44,218 people died as a result of the earthquakes, the country’s Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) said, while the latest announced death toll in Syria was 5,914.14

Nearly 530,000 people have been evacuated from the disaster area in Turkey alone and the Turkish government has said that 173,000 buildings have so far been recorded as collapsed or severely damaged, with more than 1.9 million people taking refuge in temporary shelters or hotels and public facilities.15

The region has been rocked by more than 9,000 aftershocks.

Various countries and organizations have responded to the 6 February 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquake. At least 105 countries and 16 international organizations pledged support for victims of the earthquake, including humanitarian aid. More than eleven countries provided teams with search and rescue dogs to locate victims under the debris and monetary support was offered as well.

One of these countries was Bulgaria, which dispatched 78 firefighters and rescue personnel from the Ministry of the Interior, 12 mountain rescue volunteers with 5 search and rescue dogs from the Mountain Rescue Service of the Bulgarian Red Cross, 4 surgical teams from the Ministry of Defence's Military Medical Academy and 16 rescue workers from the Emergency Reaction Department of the Municipal administration of Sofia. The majority was airlifted to Adana Şakirpaşa Airport by five flights of C-27J Spartan aircraft of the Bulgarian Air Force, with part of the firefighters deploying from Plovdiv by land with 21 emergency vehicles. On February 9, additional 20 firefighters were airlifted, along with 30 volunteer doctors, nurses and paramedics from hospitals in Sofia and the city's ambulance service.

At the same time, numerous campaigns were organized in Bulgaria to collect funds and material humanitarian aid and to send them to the affected areas. The Bulgarian government and society showed extraordinary mobilization in solidarity with the population of neighboring Turkey, as well as with that of Syria.