



Eight-year-old Azhar was one of many affected by the earthquake. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU

The earthquake changed the life of Abdul, 15

The children who experienced the earthquake in Turkey do not dare to go to school. Many have difficulty sleeping, anxiety and depression. But there are ways to process the fear. And for some, the encounter with death became a turning point.

Jesper Sundén

Published 2023-06-25

KAHRAMANMARAS The sound of shouts and laughter is exaggerated and almost deafening - as it is when a large group of children are provided with crayons and pencils and brand new white kites to fly.

- Draw what you like, prompts one of the teachers, and the children begin to fill in the empty areas of the dragons.

It is the end of the semester for the children in one of Unicef's camps for those who lost their homes in the Turkish province of Kahramanmaras, which was one of the most affected areas.

The children are sitting in the yard between two large green and oblong school buildings, but they have so far not been able to be used as intended, because the children do not dare to enter them. Therefore, teaching and activities are conducted on the farm.

The fear of buildings is just one of the consequences that the earthquake disaster had on the children.

- Many have difficulty sleeping, others suffer from eating disorders, depression, anxiety and bedwetting. Some have also had speech difficulties due to the trauma. Some also have problems with anger, especially boys, explains Begihan Bilgiç.

Svenska Dagbladet

Signed in as
Jesper Sunden



Begihan Bilgiç helps attach strips to a kite. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU

She works for the organization Turkish Development Foundation (TKV), which is responsible for the activities in the camp, in collaboration with Unicef.

Of the 9 million people affected by the earthquakes, 2.5 million are children. To deal with the psychosocial consequences of the disaster, Unicef and TKV run special programs where the children can process their feelings and experiences.

During an exercise, for example, they drew pictures of what they were afraid of. Then they showed each other the pictures and talked about their feelings. Then they advised each other on what they could do when they got scared. A psychologist also participated and talked about ways to deal with the difficult emotions.

When they had finished talking about the fears, they folded the papers, on which the pictures were drawn, into swallows, which they threw away so that they flew away.

- Now they will get to draw what they like best on the dragons, says Begihan Bilgiç.

Eight-year-old Azhar from Syria says that she drew a house on the swallow that would carry her fear. That's what she's most afraid of after the earthquake.

Now she draws a pink heart on her dragon and a sun - with a brown crayon, because all the yellow ones were busy, but it doesn't matter to her.

The only question is whether the kite will fly. It's 30 degrees and sunny, but no wind.



Sükran Kesgin hands out crayons. On the kites, the children should draw what they like. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU



A boy has drawn his best friend in full figure on the kite. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU

It was 04:17 on the morning of February 6 when the first earthquake struck southern Turkey and northwestern Syria, with a magnitude of 7.8. It was followed by several strong aftershocks.

At 1:26 p.m. the same day, another earthquake with a magnitude of 7.5 occurred further north. Two weeks later, Hatay province was hit by two additional earthquakes with magnitudes of 6.4 and 5.8 respectively.

In total, the quake killed over 50,000 people in Turkey – half of them in Hatay – and over 8,000 in Syria. The destruction of buildings and infrastructure was extensive. Over three million lost their homes.

Many chose to leave the worst affected provinces of Hatay, Kahramanmaras and Adiyaman. Of those who remained, many live today in camps while clearance and reconstruction work is underway. Outside the cities, large piles of gravel and cement rise with the remains of the razed houses.

320,000 people have been allowed to move into the 130,000 container homes that have been built, under the connivance of the Turkish disaster agency Afad. But still close to two million live in unofficial tent camps or in areas where they are not reached by functioning infrastructure, according to figures from the International Red Cross (IFRC) and Support to life (STL).

The unofficial camps often lack access to running water and electricity and those who live there receive no help from the state, which wants everyone to move into the official camps. Instead, it is local and international non-governmental organizations that help in various ways.



Meryem Kalkan and her brother Mezyet. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU

54-year-old Meryem Kalkan lives in such a camp, in the city of Antakya in Hatay. It consists of about 30 tents in a park, which is close to her damaged residence. Like most in the camp, she wants to stay close to her home to make sure it isn't looted of all its contents.

February 6, she describes as a nightmare that turned out to be true. She woke up to the whole house shaking and left the house as fast as possible. Outside it was black and raining. All around her she heard the rumble of buildings collapsing.

- I told myself that the sun will rise again and that it will feel better when it becomes day.

But when the sun rose and she saw the devastation and the piles of stones where the house had once stood, it broke for her.

- It was terrible. People could be heard screaming all around the block. No one could be reached. Neither the internet nor the mobile network worked.

Later, she would learn that her father was found under the rubble of his house. She also lost her son-in-law, aunts, uncles and cousins.

- Many were lost. My three grandchildren lost their father. I feel myself lost, I'm so sad, she says, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

Now both Meryem and her daughter wish that the grandchildren could move into an official camp near their grandmother, where they could also receive help with food, water and perhaps psychosocial help. But since they are registered in the deceased father's place of residence, it doesn't work. They can only get that there, an over 1,000 kilometer drive away.

- It doesn't feel good that they have to live with strangers, when they could live here.



In the town of Gölbaşı, there was a long crack in the ground after the earthquake. Many houses are still waiting to be demolished. Photo: Jesper Sundén

Hundreds of thousands of homes were completely destroyed by the earthquakes. Those who remain have been inspected and divided into lightly, moderately or severely injured. The severely injured are demolished immediately, while the lightly injured are allowed to move back to.

What happens to the homes classified as in between is more uncertain. It is unclear how many people can really afford to repair their houses, even if the state covers part of the cost.

The most difficult situation is for the many Syrian refugees in the area. Few of the surviving Syrians have so far been offered housing in containers. They are said to go to Turks in the first place. Therefore, it is tents that apply to the vast majority of Syrians.

As it gets warmer, it also gets tougher to stay in the tents. Already in mid-June, the heat in the most common types of tents with just a tent cloth was close to 40 degrees when it was 30 degrees outside and sunny.

- We can't be in the tent, it's too hot for the children, say Hassan and Eye, who came from Idlib to Turkey in 2015 and who now live with their two young daughters in a tent camp outside Kahramanmaras.



Eye and Hassan and their two daughters. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU

Before the earthquake, they lived a good life. Hassan worked with carpets and they lived in a rented house, but the earthquake completely shattered their existence.

They roll their eyes and explain with difficulty that they then had three daughters. Their eldest daughter was with Eye's parents when the earthquake struck. She was buried under the rubble when their house collapsed and was dead when she was exhumed. She was only 5 years old.

- It still hurts, says Hassan with eyes full of tears.

They still pay the rent for their home, which is only slightly damaged, but they don't dare to be there. There are still aftershocks that make them terrified. They hope that in time they will get over it, so that they can return to their home. But it will take time, they note.

For 15-year-old Syrian Abdul Halim, it was paradoxically the opposite. Living through the earthquake—and surviving it—gave him strength to rise from a crippling depression. He originally comes from Hama where he and his family were bombed by the Assad regime in 2015.

- My father died and my mother was injured, he says.

His legs themselves were so badly damaged that both were amputated. His uncle took him to Turkey where he received treatment and eventually leg prostheses at a clinic in Reyhanli, which is funded by the EU's aid agency Echo (Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid).



15-year-old Abdul Halim lost both legs in Syria in 2015. After the earthquake, he has a goal. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU

It meant that he could live a very normal life. Go to school and even play football. But after graduating eighth grade, he fell into a black hole. He stopped using the prostheses and going to school.

Until the terrible earthquake came.

- Most of the houses around us were destroyed, but ours only got a few cracks.

The experience rekindled a spark within him. Now he is back at the clinic to train his mobility again. Then he wants to go back to school. Now he has a goal.

- I want to become an architect and build safe houses - homes, schools and hospitals, he explains.

Something that perhaps every child in the earthquake affected areas dreams of - safe home. Also in Unicef's camp where the children paint their kites with whatever they like. Then they disperse in different directions to test their dragons' flying skills.

Eight-year-old Azhar is helped by Sükran Kesgin in trying to get her sun-adorned dragon into the air. After several attempts, it is caught by a gust of wind and rises quickly to go down the hill just as quickly. But at last the dragon manages to reach a wind that has passed those of the surrounding mountains and sails away.

Higher and higher it flies. Azhar shines like the sun. It suddenly feels like anything is possible.



Sükran Kesgin and Azhar see the dragon take off into the sky. Photo: Jesper Sundén

Humanitarian aid from the EU and Sweden

The EU and Sweden have provided extensive humanitarian support to the earthquake-affected areas in Turkey.

Immediately after the earthquake, the EU asked for its humanitarian aid so that 78.2 million euros - the equivalent of 916 million kroner - went to the victims of the earthquake. The value of the total Swedish support in April 2023 amounted to approximately SEK 550 million.

Turkey is today the country that hosts the most refugees in the world: close to 4 million. Since 2012, the EU has therefore also given 3.46 billion euros – the equivalent of 41 billion kroner – to humanitarian aid in Turkey.

A large part of this has gone through the EU's civil protection and humanitarian aid programs which have been funneled on to international and local non-governmental aid organizations on the ground in Turkey.

An important part of this has also been the program where refugees received prepaid credit cards with sums calculated based on the need for support. Something that now after the earthquake is even more important than before.



Jesper Sundén, on location in Turkey. Photo: Diego Cupolo/EU

The report was made with the support of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid.