

Recipe for Disaster in Turkey's Quake Zone

Susanne Gusten, *New York Times*, 11-3-11

ISTANBUL — Sifting through the rubble of the apartment house in which his sister died, along with her husband, her young son and five other members of her husband's family, in the earthquake in the town of Ercis last week, a young seismologist recalled his futile warnings about the safety of the building.

"I told them to have it tested" for earthquake safety, Muhlis Unaldi, a Boston University student of seismology, told the *Milliyet* newspaper, referring to the four-story apartment building the Nalbantoglu family built a few years ago.

"But they did not have it done," he said.

Now, he added, he could see from the rubble that the wrong kind of iron bars had been used to reinforce the concrete. When a 7.2-magnitude quake struck on Oct. 23, the building folded in on itself, leaving no survivors among those inside it.

More than 600 people were crushed to death in the quake and more than 2,600 injured. It was only the latest of more than 220 strong earthquakes that have rocked Anatolia over the past century, killing some 100,000 and injuring half a million, according to government figures.

Yet, in their lack of concern about building standards in the house they poured their savings into and entrusted their lives to, the Nalbantoglus were no exception in Turkey.

Two out of three buildings in Turkey are illegally constructed without permits or supervision, according to the national chamber of mechanical engineers.

Of the 18 million buildings in the country, 40 percent are not earthquake-safe, the chamber estimates in a comparatively conservative assessment — some experts guess that share to be as high as 70 or even 90 percent.

Greed and incompetence on the part of builders, as well as corruption and a lack of oversight by authorities, are the usual suspects cited in the public debate that breaks out after every quake, only to fizzle out again without noticeable effect after a few weeks.

Yet, even with builders after killer profit and many municipal authorities on the take, the question remains: Why do Turkish homeowners and tenants put up with it?

A survey conducted by the Anar polling institute found in 2005 that, at 56 percent, more than half of Turks deemed their houses unsafe in an earthquake, while 13 percent had doubts about their home's resilience. Yet, in the same survey, 81 percent admitted they had never done anything about it.

A study conducted by Erzincan University found that 73 percent of respondents in the province did not know whether their current house was safe or not — despite the fact that most of them had experienced at least one of the Erzincan quakes that killed 650 in 1992 and 33,000 in 1939.

So why do millions of Turkish families, like the Nalbantoglus of Ercis, agree to live in slipshod buildings on top of an earthquake fault line, without calling in so much as a safety inspection?

Poverty and inadequate legislation are frequently pointed to, but some experts believe the problem is a cultural one.

“Fatalism is deeply embedded in the culture of Anatolia,” a sociologist, Yusuf Ozkan Ozburun, said in an interview in Istanbul last week.

“It is a feature of local folk Islam, caused by a false understanding of Islam” under which man has no influence on a world controlled by God alone, Mr. Ozburun said.

His analysis is backed up by an international comparison of religious influences on cultural attitudes conducted by the Sabanci University of Istanbul in 2009.

In it, the political scientists Ersin Kalaycioglu and Ali Carkoglu found that only 28 percent of Turks believe they can influence the course of their lives — the lowest percentage of respondents in 30 countries considered in the study. Catholic countries like Poland and the Philippines scored closest to Turkey in the survey, which included no other predominantly Muslim country. In the United States, by contrast, more than 80 percent believe that man forges his own destiny, and in Japan almost 60 percent agree with that view.

The emerging picture of Turkey is one of “a society in which fatalism and a perception that life is shaped mainly by metaphysical forces are widely shared,” the scientists concluded.

In a similar vein, an Istanbul University survey of 1,100 survivors living in tent cities after the catastrophic 1999 Marmara quake revealed that more than two-thirds saw the quake as an act of God, fate or destiny, rather than as a natural disaster, with more than half convinced that it was an intentional punishment by God.

Consequently, most Turks rely mainly on prayer for protection against earthquakes and other disasters, as the Sabanci University study found.

“This fatalism, deeply rooted in the collective consciousness, leads to the inertia and inaction we see in Turkish society,” Mr. Ozburun said.

An incurious attitude and an unscientific mind-set are also among the national characteristics engendered in Turkish society by its deep-rooted fatalism, he added, pointing out that the Turkish word for “wonder” or “curiosity” carries a negative connotation and citing a slew of fatalist Turkish proverbs.

“It came like this and it will go like this,” is one of those adages of resignation to fate.

“Citizens do worry about earthquake safety, and rightly so, but they dither between fatalism and negligence,” Tugrul Tankut, a professor of civil engineering at Middle Eastern Technical University, told a symposium on “Turkey’s Earthquake Reality” in Ankara last year.

In addition, a tradition of authoritarian relations between citizens and the state had led Turks to rely too much on the state instead of taking initiative for their own safety, he said.

“No one says ‘My roof is leaking, the state must come and fix it,’” Mr. Tankut said. “But when it comes to earthquake safety, people sit and wait, saying ‘My house is not quake-safe, the state must come and retrofit it.’”

“There’s no difference between the two, yet that’s the way people see it, for whatever reasons.”

Nor can lack of funds, sometimes cited as an explanation for widespread acquiescence in shoddy housing, be a viable reason, the professor said, pointing out that earthquake safety measures add no more than 3 to 5 percent to the cost of construction of a house.

“People are always asking me: ‘Professor, when will buildings be earthquake safe?’” he told the Ankara

symposium. “The answer to that is very simple: This problem will be solved as soon as people are prepared to spend as much money on their safety as they spend on pink bathroom tiles.”

As for the building laws and regulations that are once again under public scrutiny and debate after the Van earthquake, many experts do not think tinkering with them will fix the problem.

Most people were unconcerned even with existing regulations, preferring to trust that God would protect them even as they built shoddy housing in unsuitable areas, Mr. Ozburun, the sociologist, said.

Mr. Tankut, the engineer, takes a similar view. “As long as the mentality remains the same, you can change the rules and the system as much as you like,” he told the Ankara symposium. “But in practice nothing will change at all.”