

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Carole Beaulieu
William F. Foote
Peter Gelfiner
Pranila Jayapa
Peter Bird Martin
Judith Mayer
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund Sulton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wiggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Haggood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

WM-7
EUROPE/RUSSIA

Whitney Mason is an Institute Fellow studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

Forty-five Seconds of Hell

ISTANBUL, Turkey

November, 1999

By Whitney Mason

When western Turkey began its deadly convulsions at 3:02 on the morning of Tuesday August 17, I was drinking a beer with two friends and decompressing after a ten-hour drive through what turned out to be the epicenter of the quake. Before the word "earthquake" had even passed before my mind's eye, reflexive fear had carried me out the door and down the swaying marble steps. Outside, the cobblestoned street was rolling like swells on the sea while hundreds of shaking buildings sounded like a marina full of sailboats straining at their lines along with thousands of tinkling wind chimes.

Moments later my second friend arrived with his three-year-old daughter in his arms, followed by his wife and stepson. The unflattering truth is that I hadn't even considered the children until seeing them emerge from the building. Just after they arrived all the visible lights went out. Until some moments after the 45-second spasm was over, we stood there under the stars bracing ourselves with our feet far apart like sailors on a storm-tossed ship. And we were in fact being rocked by waves rippling through the earth's crust — three different kinds, as I learned later, of which the most destructive comes last.

When the earth was still again we became aware of other figures in various states of undress standing in the darkness. Neighbors who saw each other every day but rarely spoke embraced one another and exchanged a Turkish greeting, meaning "may you be past it," that's usually addressed to someone who is ill. Along with hundreds of others we drifted to a nearby square on the Bosphorous Strait that divides the Asian and European parts of Istanbul. Cafes that had closed just a few hours before gradually re-opened and people crowded around every table. We asked patrolling police cars for information they didn't have and gathered around a transistor radio waiting to hear what had happened elsewhere and what we could expect next.

The call to prayer that comes every morning before dawn from the mosque on the square and throughout the Muslim world never came; since the electricity was out the *hoja* — the prayer leader — couldn't broadcast his message over the public address system. And apparently even he feared to ascend the delicate minaret to call the faithful the old-fashioned way.

Most people stayed on the square until well past dawn. Sensitized to irregularities, we felt dozens of aftershocks. Big waves slammed against the sea wall with no ships to account for them. People gazed at a bright red glow across the water on the hill where the sultans used to live. It's a fire, said many people. It's just the reflection of the rising sun, said others. But after the shock of what had happened, even the rationalists couldn't feel so certain. Nor could we be entirely

sure whether the vibrations we thought we felt were actual quakes or figments of our imagination. Like a cuckolded husband, I felt jittery with novel and profound doubts: After the earth had once betrayed my faith that it would remain static, how could I ever really trust it again?

By the time exhaustion overcame our apprehension about returning indoors, my friends and I were feeling almost giddily euphoric. What we didn't know then was the devastation done to other parts of Istanbul and the apocalyptic destruction in towns to the east along the shores of the Sea of Marmara.

DAY TWO

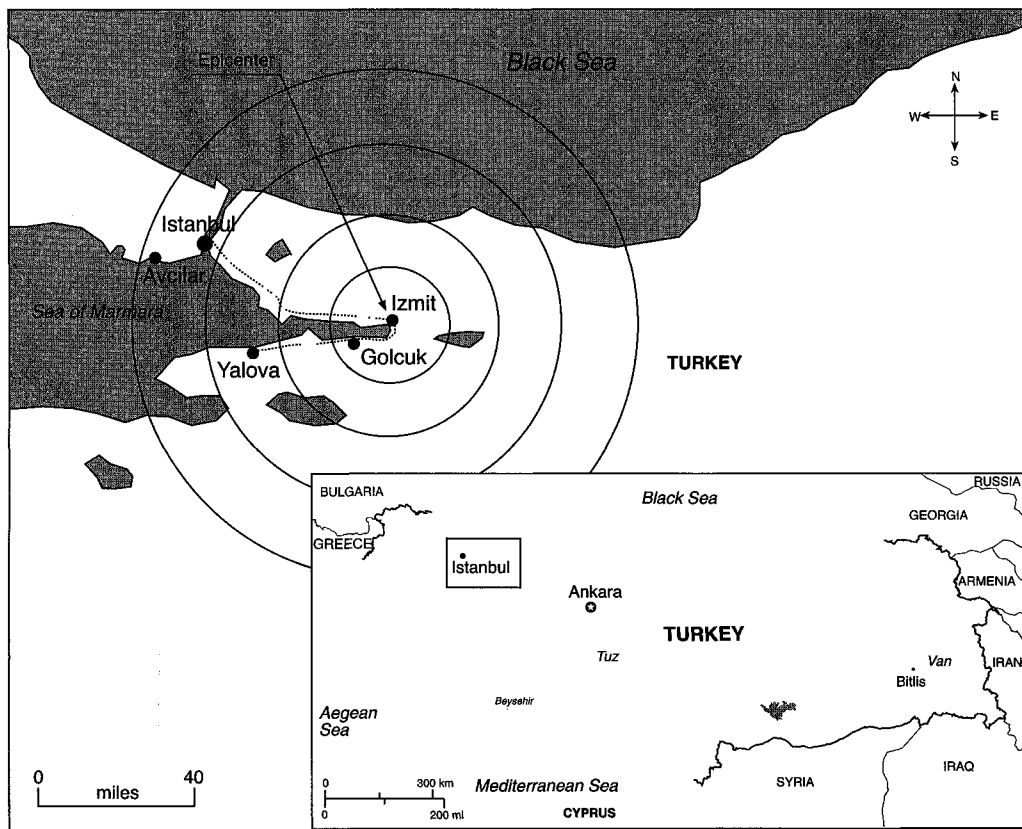
After a strange day of restless catnapping and commiserating, that evening I borrowed my friend's car and drove out to Avclar, the worst-hit neighborhood in Istanbul. Throughout that night I watched neighbors and relatives of missing people using their bare hands to dig at piles of heavy rubble that had been six- and seven-story apartment buildings. At one site there was a bulldozer that was of little use, at another no heavy equipment at all. The only trained rescue workers were volunteers from a recently founded search-and-rescue organization called Akut. An ambulance stood by waiting to carry survivors to the hospital, but there were no government rescue workers trying to get people out.

A mother who had lost two children hurled herself against a mound of crumbled concrete, weeping and beg-

ging for someone to help dig them out. A man shouted that though he'd already lost his own two children, he was ready to do anything to save those who might still be alive. But there were no tools and without them, people's efforts were almost futile. A friend of mine broke into a neighboring apartment building and found a pick and shovel that became the main weapons against this monolithic tomb.

By morning seismologists were estimating the quake at 7.4 on the Richter scale and the official death toll had reached nearly 4,000 with many thousands more still trapped under demolished buildings. Over 1,000 rescue workers had arrived in Turkey from over 19 countries. Among the first to respond, with a planeload of emergency supplies and effective rescue teams, was Greece, Turkey's inveterate regional rival.

As the friend whose car I'd borrowed had left Turkey and there were none available to rent, in the morning I caught a ride to the industrial hub of Izmit, near the epicenter, with a friend who was working as a cameraman for Swiss TV. As soon as we left the turnpike we came upon a collapsed building and stopped. In a stroke of luck for the TV reporter, a Swiss team was there using ultrasensitive microphones and dogs to search for signs of life in a pile of rubble that had been a seven-story apartment building. Neighbors and relatives of victims were looking on in shock. As a man's body was pulled from the dense mound of crumbled concrete dotted with pieces of furniture and clothing, an elderly woman wearing a



headscarf rocked back and forth wailing, "My brother, my soul."

I saw one young man whose face was especially gaunt and blank, his eyes wide with horror. After returning from the army in July, he had become engaged to his 19-year-old childhood sweetheart. A few hours before, he had seen the top of her dead body; she still lay there among the debris because her legs remained trapped under a column that couldn't be safely moved.

When the earthquake struck, five neighbors who had been having tea on a balcony on the seventh floor of this building were thrown clear and survived. In the hours just after the quake, neighbors and relatives extracted three others alive. Later in the afternoon when the Swiss and rescue teams from the south of Turkey found three more people, all of them were dead. Five more — two boys, one girl and two adults — remained trapped inside.

As rescue efforts began to yield more corpses than miracles, tens of thousands of Turks began to realize what they had lost during those 45 seconds when the earth shook their world to its foundations. Yet for all the tragedy here, loss of life could have been much worse. This building was in a middle-class neighborhood and most people were away on vacation; in 26 apartments, only 16 people were home when the quake struck.

Forty-eight hours after the quake, in addition to the foreign teams, hundreds of Turkish rescue workers were also active trying to find people trapped beneath the rubble. But for more than 24 hours after the disaster — and in many places much longer — there had been no official emergency services at many collapsed buildings where neighbors, relatives and volunteer rescue workers scraped at the rubble without even a pick and shovel. Many Turks observed that policemen out on the streets did nothing to help. Most shocking of all, Turkey's vaunted Army was very thin on the ground. In the town of Golcuk, where up to 10,000 people remained trapped under concrete, one began to hear Turks complaining that the military was focusing prodigious resources on a Navy base where many sailors and officers were buried while sparing nothing for the civilians they existed to defend.

DAY THREE

The next afternoon, after filing a long report for National Public Radio, I took a series of ferries from Istanbul to the devastated town of Yalova on the southern shore of the Izmit Gulf that bisected the epicenter. My main objective was to find Sarp Yelkencioglu, a volunteer rescue worker I'd met in Avclar who'd lived in Baltimore and whom *The Baltimore Sun* had asked me to profile. The frayed people who crowded onto the ferries looked like war refugees except that they were rushing toward the front rather than away from it. Most were pale with exhaustion and sat quietly but several people got into

the sorts of loud arguments that are fairly common in New York but rare in Turkey.

By the time I reached Yalova it was well past nine and dark — very dark, since the electricity was out. I checked my cell phone, which was my only hope of finding Sarp, and saw that it had no signal. I jumped onto a crowded minibus known as a *dolmus* bound for somewhere near Golcuk. The roads were packed with cars while traffic control — always rather casual in Turkey — had evaporated altogether. For 20 minutes or so we crept along amid thousands of cars that were trying to carve six or seven lanes out of the highway's usual two. The scene appeared to me like a modern-day version of the chaotic flight of the Greeks as the Turkish army chased them out of Anatolia in 1923.

When we had sat without moving for ten minutes or so I spotted a restaurant and hopped out to get something to eat for the first time since morning. By the time my *pide* — a sort of saucelless pizza — arrived, the *dolmus* had disappeared. After finishing the meal I checked my phone again and saw that it still had no signal. Other patrons told me that all the transmitters in the area were out. For me that meant finding Sarp that night was out too. Without transportation and at that hour it didn't seem realistic to expect to do any reporting, so I decided to start making my way back to Istanbul. It was around eleven when I walked out to the highway and stuck my thumb out, fully expecting to be on the road all night.

Seconds later a new red BMW stopped. The driver, a middle-aged engineer, said he was heading to Istanbul. I could hardly believe my luck; but by then I could hardly believe anything. He explained that he'd driven to Golcuk every night since the quake, hoping to be on hand when the body of his aunt was extracted from her collapsed apartment. She had been like a mother to him, and he felt duty-bound to ensure that she received a proper burial — even though it meant adding a nonessential vehicle to the traffic. In this disaster, it seemed, it was every family for itself.

Because he was exhausted from three nights of making this horrible trip he asked me to drive for a while. As I edged us along through the traffic jam, he vented his disgust over the abysmal construction standards that had contributed so much to the scale of death. (There were of course, scrupulous contractors. In an interview with *Newsweek*, Ishak Alaton was able to boast that of the hundreds of apartments his building had built in the area, none had suffered so much as a crack.)

That night, which dragged on until we reached Istanbul after 3 in the morning, also revealed two macabre new features of this disaster. The first was the presence of dozens of young men brandishing pipes and sticks, warning civilian vehicles to stay out of the way of emergency ones. This was the first sign of a perverse com-

petition for scarce resources that developed that first week between patrons of the dead and of those still clinging to life. The second discovery of that night was the sickening smell of thousands of rotting human bodies. It had been hot, remember, and the compressed concrete buildings must have been like pizza ovens. I told my new friend that the bodies had been baking. "Baking is for bread," he said, correcting my Turkish and supplying a word I hadn't heard before. I looked it up in my dictionary: "roasting". That was the correct word, all right.

DAY FOUR

The next day I caught a ride back to Golcuk with the Swiss TV crew. The official death toll had then reached 10,000. Wearing surgical masks to block the stench of still unnumbered corpses, we stopped at a wreck of a building in the town center. A fresh, raw new level of desperation hung in the air as ambulances raced along the shoulders of clogged roads while relatives of victims raced against time to rescue loved ones.

The administrative head of this part of Golcuk said that relatives and neighbors of missing people had performed miraculous rescues: on Friday hundreds were found alive and only three dead. Most rescues had been performed by untrained volunteers. But time was running out and the mayor pleaded for everyone who could hear his message to send help immediately.

Even from seven- and eight-story buildings that were compressed to single-story mounds of concrete, and despite scorching heat for the past few days, many survivors were still emerging. At Golcuk's main hospital we saw people being brought in on stretchers, conscious and appearing in better condition than I would have expected. Dr. Ozan Bahtiar, an Ob-Gyn resident at Yale New Haven Hospital, had been home for vacation when the quake struck and was volunteering at the hospital: "What's amazing is that people are still alive — but they're in very poor condition — they are badly dehydrated and experiencing renal failure."

Dr. Bahtiar warned that survivors were approaching a biological threshold. While we were interviewing, one of the nurses ran around wearing a dissonant expression of ecstasy: she had just discovered that her boyfriend was still alive amid the rubble of his collapsed apartment building. But he was still trapped and everyone at the hospital knew that he couldn't hang on forever.

At another collapsed building in Golcuk an enraged-looking man accosted me. "I didn't even know there was a crisis center until this afternoon," he raved. "And when I found it, they wouldn't help me take my injured friend to a hospital." With wild desperation in his eyes, he named the institutions he always believed would help him in a crisis but had not. Topping his list was the Army. "This is a war," screamed this man. Like many friends

and relatives of people who remained trapped for days, he was furious that the Army wasn't directly helping to get them out.

Most Turks regard the Army as the cornerstone of the Republic, known affectionately as the "Devlet babasi" or "Daddy State." Many victims of the earthquake seemed to expect the Army to respond within hours to a catastrophe for which it had not trained. But in the first three or four days in the worst-hit areas Turkey's vaunted military was thin on the ground. Those soldiers who were in these areas were mostly standing around demolished buildings with machine guns slung over their shoulders, providing "security."

While peoples' faith in the Army was collapsing, civilian volunteers — both Turks and foreigners — were emerging as unexpected heroes. One team worked for 48 hours to free a 16-year-old boy whose legs were crushed under a concrete block and began to putrefy as his mother looked on. After round-the-clock ministrations by a Turkish pediatrician, and extraction work by two Russian search-and-rescue workers and several volunteers from Akut — including Turkey's most famous mountain climber, Nasuh Mahruki — the boy was rescued.

Hitchhiking from Izmit back to Istanbul that evening, I caught a ride with Serdar Meccek, who owns a small kebab restaurant that caters to auto mechanics in his Istanbul neighborhood. That morning, he told me, he'd woken up to news that countries around the world were sending relief aid. But in his neighborhood, he said, "Nobody was ready to help the people like other countries. Everybody's just sitting in their places and thinking about money. No one's thinking: 'Are they dying? Are they hungry? Are they ill?' They are just thinking, 'We survived, we are alright and so no problem'." Serdar himself closed shop for the day and spent all the cash he had on hand — about \$120 — buying 1,000 loaves of bread that he then distributed to people who'd lost their homes all over Izmit.

I was impressed by Meccek's sincerity and integrity and his comments became the highlight of another story for National Public Radio. But I'm not sure how valid his criticism was. It took a couple of days before many survivors felt safe themselves. For many nights after the quake thousands of people slept in parks, fearing a second quake that would be even worse than the first. Thousands more were on the roads, driving to look for relatives they couldn't reach by phone. And both neighbors and relatives of those buried saved many people by working at the rubble with nothing but their hands. By the third day relief supplies were pouring into the stricken area from all over Turkey and the rest of the world.

It's not surprising that Turks mostly responded to the quake by jumping in their cars and racing toward

their stricken relatives, rather than joining volunteer brigades that might have operated more efficiently. Despite their pervasive nationalism Turks have a deep skepticism of groups, expressed in the aphorism (which I mentioned in WM-2) that translates "Where there are many, there is shit." The biggest unit that most Turks really trust is their family. Their skepticism is reinforced by experiences like going to the hospital in more normal times, when the sick and injured are often treated with an indifference that many Turks have told me borders on contempt.

Another cultural factor that contributed to the scale of the devastation is that many Turks have a fatalistic attitude toward death. Turks have a very high rate of dying in traffic accidents, yet a very low rate of wearing seat belts. Even Serdar, the bread Samaritan, told me he believed the quake had been prophesied by the medieval seer Nostradamus.

Feeling raw from sleeplessness and the sadness of the hundreds of personal tragedies I'd seen that week, I concluded an essay for *Newsday* with the following paragraph:

"Americans may regard such hocus pocus with derision, since people in the West draw comfort from the illusion that they can control their environment. And yet, looking at an apartment building reduced to rubble while all those around it remain undamaged, I found it hard to gainsay Turks' traditional fatalism. It is certainly true that if the Turkish government had been better prepared and contractors had been more scrupulous in their building standards, the earthquake would have taken fewer lives. But against the enormity of the catastrophe this potential marginal difference seems almost beside the point. The truth is that this quake was, like death itself, a great leveler, bringing down both the humble and the mighty — including the head of Turkey's most powerful union and several senior military officers. Nearly all the people who have died here did nothing more foolhardy than to go to sleep in their own beds. I am not a religious person; but thinking of these thousands who now will never awake has brought home to me more powerfully than ever before the fact that there but for the grace of God go I."

DAY FIVE

In order to get the military's side of the story and return quickly to the epicenter, some 90 miles from Istanbul, I decided to try to catch a ride on an Army helicopter. When I arrived with my amanuensis Serdar at the venerable Selimiye Barracks, on a bluff commanding the entrance to the Bosphorous, the road leading to the main gate was full of military men in dress uniform. They were laying to rest three military people killed at the Golcuk base — a sergeant, a colonel and the wife of an admiral. As the hoja led prayers for the dead at the mosque next to the base, some 100 mourners recited their prayers with their palms turned upward in the Muslim

ritual of supplication. As soldiers loaded the caskets onto wagons — the soldiers' draped in Turkish flags and the admiral's wife's in the green banner of Islam — the Army band struck up the most mournful dirge I'd ever heard. Many of the officers were too overcome by emotion to speak. Soldiers, as one officer said, are after all only human themselves. The scene brought home how the devastation of deaths from this natural calamity was in some way more inconsolable than those lost fighting a human enemy in war.

After the funeral the guard at the main gate pointed me toward an officer whom I asked for permission to ride on a helicopter. Exuding the reflexive obduracy of the majority of his caste, he refused me point-blank. I approached an officer wearing a more open expression. The Army had received an enormous amount of criticism for its response to the quake, I told him. I was anxious to tell the Army's side of the story, but for that to happen they had to cooperate. The officer took this in and referred me to another gate closer to the helipad. I took his name and told guards at the other gate that he'd given Serdar and me permission to fly, which was an exaggeration. In any case, it was enough for the soldiers at the second gate to feel that they weren't admitting us on their own authority and they waved us through.

As we sat at the edge of the helipad waiting for a helicopter going to Golcuk, we talked with the doctors and helicopter pilots who'd been making medevac flights. The officers said they felt they had done the best they could after suffering devastating losses themselves. To me they had the focused, exhausted look of men at war. During the 30 minutes or so we waited two helicopters landed with elderly patients whom teams of doctors and nurses rushed to waiting ambulances.

Instinctively bending low to avoid the rotors, Serdar and I boarded a chopper bound for Golcuk. After 20 minutes or so in the hot, shuddering box the pilot pulled back on the joy stick and eased us down to NATO's biggest naval base in the eastern Mediterranean. An Israeli rescue team working on a collapsed building next to the pad pointed us to the headquarters building to find a Turkish officer who could speak on the record. We found a tall, English-speaking captain, the base's executive officer, who told us that when the quake struck at three in the morning, the electricity went out and the base was plunged in darkness. When the sun rose two hours later, they saw that 260 of their comrades were buried under rubble. Since then, with the help of search-and-rescue teams from Israel, France and Spain, they had pulled 128 people from the wreckage. The Navy had 50 dead and 50 more remained buried under the collapsed buildings. While acknowledging that the military had given first priority to saving its own, the captain said that in the first 12 hours after the quake the Navy and Army had also managed to evacuate about one thousand injured civilians, mostly by ship and helicopter. Fifteen thousand



A strangely crumpled office building near Golcuk

soldiers were in the area, he said, helping with security, communications and distributing emergency supplies. But much of this effort was invisible to civilians around the base who shouted through the fence, first begging for help then cursing the military for not delivering it.

FAULTS WITHOUT TREMORS

Even before the government called off the rescue effort eight days after the quake, the disaster had aroused bitter denunciations that appeared to reveal fault lines running through Turkish society. Survivors' fury had plenty of targets besides the military. Newspapers ran banner headlines calling the contractors who built apartments that collapsed "murderers." One apartment building I saw in Istanbul imploded because the owners of a car showroom on the ground floor had cut out four essential support columns in order to make more room for their cars. Many contractors had cut corners to build housing quickly and cheaply for the thousands of people who every month migrate from the provinces into the Istanbul area. Government officials had colluded by looking the other way, sometimes for a financial consideration.

The most notorious builder was a pillar of virtue named Veli Gocer, who specialized in inexpensive housing for retirees. Of the 3,000 buildings his firm put up near the epicenter, 480 collapsed completely, killing 160 people. Another 120 buildings were too damaged to be inhabitable. Given his construction standards, it's a wonder any remained standing at all: Gocer's builders mixed concrete with sea sand taken directly from the beach and didn't reinforce it with any steel re-bar. Engineers estimate that for a six-story, 26-unit building this would have saved him about \$10,000. For his crass form of murder Gocer faces a mere

four to 10 years on prison. They promise, however, to be very long years: in early November fellow prisoners objected to sharing space with such a villain, and Gocer was moved to a single cell. His trial likewise had to be moved from Izmit to Konya for security reasons.

Notwithstanding his pariah status, Gocer is not alone in his infamy. Prosecutors have opened 163 separate investigations of contractors, including some of Turkey's biggest firms. How many of these will finally lead to trial remains to be seen. One of the big firms to be investigated is Yuksel Insaat, whose owner, a Member of Parliament from the far-right Nationalist Movement Party or MHP, enjoys immunity from prosecution.

In the first weeks after the quake many of the most bizarre headlines were generated by Health Minister Osman Durmus of the ultranationalist National Movement Party. Among other outrageous actions, Durmus announced his rejection of three ships that President Clinton dispatched from the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet in answer to a request from Turkish President Suleyman Demirel. (The ships came anyway.) One of the vessels Durmus tried to reject was a hospital ship with 2,000 beds and 250 doctors. In public Durmus declared that Turkey had more than enough of both. Doctors in Turkish state hospitals were dismayed: Durmus had just ordered them to work 40 hours straight with an eight hour break before putting in another 40 hours of work. While boasting about Turkey's surfeit of doctors and hospital beds, Durmus turned down blood donated by Greece with the excuse that Turkey didn't have enough containers. Durmus also slammed the door on rescue teams from Greece, Romania and Armenia. After an Italian rescue team had had the temerity to request portable toilets,

Durmus said they could very well use the toilets in the nearby mosque. If the mosque toilets weren't up to the Italians' standards, the Health Minister demanded, "What am I supposed to do — clean them myself?"

The quake also elicited provocative declarations from some Islamists. This report from the centrist newspaper *Hurriyet* was typical of the Islamist spin and the antipathy it evoked from secularists: "Headscarved students demonstrating in front of Istanbul's Marmara University against the headscarf ban on campuses, displayed on Oct. 7 a placard which asked, 'Has 7.4 not been enough?' That was the demonstrators' way of interpreting the magnitude 7.4 quake which hit the Marmara region, causing 20,000 deaths. Obviously they mean to say: 'The quake has killed those who are not true Muslims. Allah has punished them.' The religion-mongers are focusing on the Marmara University in their campaign against the headscarf ban."

Given the level of rage many Turks felt toward the Army, local leaders and contractors in the first weeks after the earthquake, many here expected the disaster to shake the political establishment. Indeed, as Carol Migdalovitz of the Congressional Research Service wrote in a report on the quake presented to the U.S. Congress, in any democratic Western country a government that responded so poorly to a natural disaster would not be able to stay long in office. (Of course this applies only to the parliamentary systems of Western Europe and Canada, not to the U.S.) In Turkey, says the report, "Domestic criticism of the state's response has been unprecedented in its scope, and some analysts hope that the earthquake will spur change to the political system." But in Turkey, Migdalovitz predicts no change in the government or political system.

"Political reform requires action by those in power that might result in their losing power, however, which is unlikely in Turkey under present conditions," wrote Migdalovitz. "How long popular anger at the state will last is uncertain. The government and military closed ranks against their critics and turned on the media for 'demoralizing' the people and troops. State censors suspended operations of a television station because of its castigating commentary."

Health Minister Durmus accused Akut, the volunteer search-and-rescue organization that had emerged as a bright spot in the generally dismal Turkish response, of spreading pernicious rumors about the danger of epidemics in destroyed towns. A Website run by Durmus's party, the Nationalist Movement Party, also accused Akut of being motivated by vanity and other sins.

A report issued by the State Office of Statistics a month after the quake found that 43,523 buildings had been destroyed or badly damaged. The official death toll was 17,000, though most people believe the real figure is significantly higher. These deaths scarred many thou-

sands more. Many of the thousands made homeless were forced to live in tents. The state was discredited. Many Turkish friends told me they'd never felt so ashamed of their country. And yet this disaster did have a bright side.

Since its founding from the ashes of World War I the Turkish Republic has largely defined itself as a beleaguered citadel surrounded by vicious neighbors. This myth has been undermined by the enormous amount of assistance that neighbors rushed to Turkey after the quake. Emergency aid was contributed by an astounding 87 countries, including 2,463 search and rescue teams. The dramatic aid contributed by Greece, in particular, infused Turks with enormous goodwill toward their principal rival in the region and seemed to usher in a new era of opportunities to resolve disputes that have bedeviled the neighbors for decades. Six weeks after the quake Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou visited a village near the epicenter where Greece had donated 150 prefabricated homes. "The door to a new perspective and hope has been opened and we have to keep this door open forever," said Papandreou. Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem echoed this optimism in an address to the UN General Assembly. "Following the earthquake that struck the two countries, (an earthquake in Athens killed 143) the emotions and solidarity displayed by the Turkish and Greek peoples demonstrate that the two peoples will not accept confrontation and tension as a way of life and that they prefer friendship." Subsequent comments from Turkish officials have suggested that public expectations of rapprochement may be exaggerated. In his UN address Cem reiterated the traditional Turkish position on Cyprus, the most divisive issue between the two countries, saying that a negotiated settlement on the island had to progress from the recognition of "two separate peoples, two separate states in Cyprus."

CAMP COMPLACENCY

Two months after the earthquake I went back to Golcuk to see how the cleanup was progressing and talk to survivors living in tent camps. Five people had just died when a building they were demolishing collapsed prematurely. Randolph Langenbach, a civil engineer with the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency who was working in Golcuk at the time, said the methods of demolition being used in Turkey were the most dangerous he'd ever seen.

I randomly chose a camp visible from the highway outside Golcuk. About 80 tents occupied a flat, open field surrounded by newish two-story houses. Half the tents were spacious, square and sturdy-looking and had been provided by a private firm. The others were small teepee-shaped things bearing the logo of the Red Crescent, Turkey's equivalent of the Red Cross.

The Red Crescent had come under heavy fire from the media for sending too little aid too slowly and for

squandering the millions of dollars Turks had donated before the quake. A Turkish TV station showed a Red Crescent depot outside Ankara that housed old materials, some of which dated back to World War II. When thousands of earthquake victims complained that the canvas tents they'd been given became soaked in the rain, Red Crescent Chairman Kemal Demir insisted that the tents were produced according to nationally approved Turkish standards and that foreign tents were too expensive. Demir's thriftiness even went so far as to charge about \$16 for a shroud and \$150 for a full burial. Instead of squandering funds on waterproof tents, Demir had built a lavish new headquarters and a \$17-million shopping center in the heart of Ankara. While Demir was fielding the media's accusations of profligacy he was staying in a hotel suite costing \$465 a night.

Members of Parliament have called for a commission to investigate the organization — which is not likely to be a route to speedy justice. A previous commission investigating the Red Crescent lost credibility when it was discovered that one of its members was a relative of a procurement officer accused of accepting kickbacks. The criticism eventually prompted Demir, 78, to resign after 20 years at the helm. He handed the reins to his close friend, 71-year-old Yuksel Bozer, whose first act was to award Demir a medal of merit.

I approached a group of women sitting on chairs outside one of the teepees. As we talked on the side of the road, several others joined the conversation. The food truck arrived with dinner and after people had collected their rations, which they offered to share with me, they invited me to join them around a campfire. The people said there were two kinds of people in the camp — those

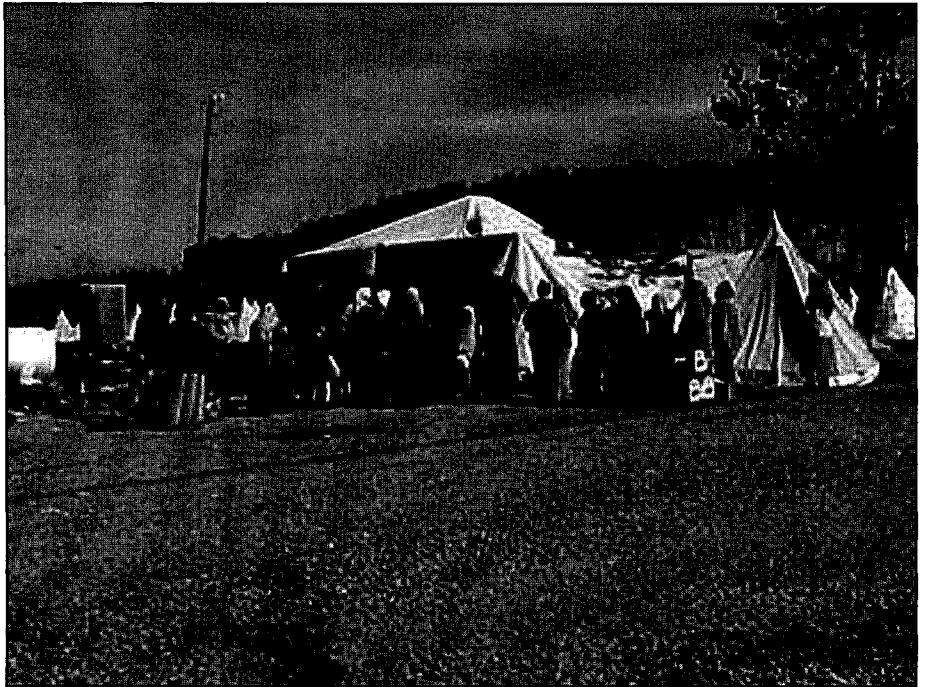
whose houses had collapsed and those who were just afraid to return home. Those who were really homeless resented the others. The women complained about a man of Georgian extraction who ran the local supply depot, saying he discriminated in favor of fellow Georgians and against people whose houses weren't destroyed, whom he regarded as freeloaders. Many who'd lost their homes also lost relatives and were too devastated to stay in tents. Instead they'd gone to stay with relatives in Anatolia. The worst-off were people who'd been self-employed and had lost their businesses, since they had no social-security benefits.

The government has given some displaced people rent subsidies of 100 million *lire* a month. Before the quake, rents in the area were 50 or 60 million a month; since the subsidy began, they have all jumped to 100 million or more. Even at these inflated prices, all the housing in the area has now been rented. The women were now only hoping for winter tents, which were due to arrive the next week.

I asked the women how they'd survived the quake. A teenage girl said she'd run out of her building just in time to see the one across the street implode before her eyes. A young mother said she and her family had no chance to escape and a wardrobe had fallen on her little daughter. But "*Allah korudu*" ("Allah protected us"), she said: the building was seriously damaged but didn't collapse. Sixteen of her relatives in the area hadn't been so lucky. A man walking with the aid of a cane said he'd been one of 11 people who survived because they'd been on the top floor of their five-story building when it fell; more than 50 others on lower floors died. Like the vast majority of people who walked or were pulled alive from



A makeshift preschool in the camp



Quake survivors in a camp near Golcuk receiving a delicious lunch from the Red Crescent

the wreckage of buildings, he had been pulled out by relatives and neighbors.

The first trucks bearing emergency supplies that these survivors had seen came from the Beyoglu Belediye, a borough of central Istanbul, which is controlled by the Islamist Virtue Party. People said the earthquake had strengthened religious belief, especially among young people. No one in the camp believed that Allah had sent the quake to punish Turks for straying from Islam, as some Islamists had claimed. "Of course it wasn't a punishment," they said, "but it clearly came from Allah and through this manifestation of his power we've come to know him better."

All the women told me they were very happy with the public support they'd received, but angry with the state. "The Red Crescent distributed stoves," said one, "and made us sign a stack of papers promising to give them back." The stoves had not come with fuel, which instead was supplied by the Virtue Party administration of Beyoglu Belediye. "I wonder whether they'll make us give back the gas they gave us," one of the women joked.

People said they didn't believe the government's official death toll of around 17,000. They said the actual number of dead must be closer to 40 or 50 thousand, pointing out that 750 had died just in the apartment complex next to the camp.

Survivors said they'd been psychologically devastated and needed non-existent treatment. People felt both depressed and constantly on edge over fear of another quake. One evening when the young mother had been adjusting the lightbulb in their tent, making the light flicker,

her little girl had shouted, "Hayde, Annem, deprem." ("Let's go, Mama, it's an earthquake.") Mothers were also upset that the start of the school year had been delayed a month.

The camp residents' criticism didn't extend to the Army. Although they acknowledge that the Army didn't show up to help until four or five days after the quake, they had no complaints. It was perfectly natural, they insisted, that the Army had been temporarily stunned by the chaos and concentrated on saving its own.

I asked whether anyone whose building had collapsed was considering suing the contractor. "Who would you sue?" demanded an energetic man sitting on the far side of the fire. "The contractors? They could only build the way they did (using substandard materials) with the collusion of government officials. And you're never going to nail them, so what's the point?"

This may be overly pessimistic. In addition to court cases against 163 contractors, the day after the conversation around the campfire the mayor and a city councilman from Yalova turned themselves in after being arrested in absentia for their roles in constructing buildings of spectacular shoddiness. The critical man went on to say that all Turks shared some responsibility for the tragedy because everyone cheated, witness the fact that half the people around the fire hadn't lost their homes and had no legal right to live in the camp. "We have every kind of cheating — between individuals, between the government and individuals, within the government. Everyone knows that the system runs on bribes and no one does anything to change it."

On my second visit to the camp a young woman I'd

Camp directors Khan and Faruk and my friend Serdar in their tent



met before told me that two guys who were sitting in a small booth serving as an office wanted to talk with me. As a policeman in the camp had already told me that taking photos was forbidden (an order I ignored), I bristled at the peremptory invitation. When the two young men, dressed in sweatshirts and jeans, repeated that taking photos was “*yasak*,” forbidden, I told them that building apartments out of sea sand with no steel reinforcing rods was *yasak* too, but that hadn’t stopped many builders in the area from doing it. And unlike the shoddy construction, my photos would never lead to anyone’s death. After what had happened, shouldn’t we all focus on more serious problems than photos? I asked. They responded by inviting me to have a coffee, which quickly evolved into lunch in their tent.

Faruk was a young policeman seconded from the city of Adana, some 600 miles to the southeast, and Khan a civil engineer from Istanbul who was volunteering his time. Faruk explained that he was concerned about publicity because despite the camp’s good condition, many people still loved to complain. Out of 71 families living in the camp, down from a high of 96, 43 had actually lost their homes in the August 17 quake. Those who complained the loudest, he added, were those whose homes remained intact and who were living in the camp because they found it comfortable and were afraid to go home.

Apart from the pokiness of the Red Crescent teepees, conditions in the camp were quite comfortable. The Red Crescent had distributed 56,000 stoves in the area, 103 of which were in this camp. It delivered hot lunches and dinners, one of which I tried and found delicious. There was a big parking lot and a colorfully decorated tent set

up as a kindergarten staffed by camp residents.

When people complained about some violation of camp rules, generally someone taking more than his share of donated materials, Faruk would ask them to write out a complaint so that he could then get permission to investigate. Almost invariably the complainants would refuse to write anything. In other words, said Faruk, the complaints were just malicious gossip and weren’t meant to change anything. A rare instance in which a group of camp residents did file a formal complaint involved a woman who had taken a couple of loaves of donated bread. Other camp residents said she was the “rich” owner of many sheep and so had no right to the free bread. In his investigation Faruk found that the woman was indeed well-off and that she had donated about 15 of her sheep to the camp without anyone realizing it as well as attracting big donations from relatives in Holland.

Faruk was especially sensitive because he’d gotten in trouble the previous week for trying to be flexible. A truck full of donations from the (Islamist) Virtue Party had arrived with no permission to distribute them. All parties are forbidden to distribute material with their name or icons on the packaging. The Virtue materials were appropriately unmarked but Faruk asked the driver to get permission to distribute them from the local governor. A few hours later the truck driver returned with a note from the town mayor bearing the wrong date. Despite the permission being invalid, Faruk allowed the truck to distribute its materials. Contrary to the driver’s assurances that everything would be distributed evenly, though, Virtue-Party workers gave all their largesse to known

party supporters. Those left out complained to Faruk's chief with the result that he was under investigation. He expected to be docked two days' pay, about \$34. Faruk said he was glad he let the truck into the camp, as two families who'd lacked blankets got some and altogether the camp had gained some \$434 worth of materials.

Since being reminded that Istanbul occupies an area prone to devastating earthquakes, Istanbulis have been treated to an outpouring of speculation, ranging from seers to scientists, about when and where the next quake will strike and how bad it will be. Among the most persuasive and alarming prognostications have come from Celal Sengor, a US-educated polyglot and professor of structural geology at Istanbul Technical University. Sengor's analysis drew largely on the work of Caroline Finkel, a British Ottomanist who, with bizarre serendipity, had recently finished her doctoral dissertation on the history of earthquakes in Anatolia over the past 500 years.

The current geology of Anatolia, the so-called "neotectonics," is 10 to 15 million years old. Two main faults — defined as cracks dividing pieces of earth moving in parallel to one another — run through Turkey, one from the NE along the Sea of Marmara and the other from the NE to the SE. The African plate, said Sengor, is diving under Turkey at a rate of about 4 cm a year. The Arabian plate is moving along the Dead Sea at 5 cm a year and displacing Turkey at a rate of 2 cm a year. Quakes occur when the lithosphere, the top 100 km of the earth's crust, loses elasticity. Pressure from displaced plates — like the Anatolian plate being displaced by the Arabian — builds up and eventually bursts.

Finkel's data, including a graph of seismic activity over the past two millennia, reveals that NW Anatolia, the area around the Sea of Marmara and Istanbul, have experienced major quakes about every 250 years. A quake in 1509 in northwestern Anatolia was felt as far away as the Danube and Cairo. It killed 5,000 in Istanbul and destroyed all the houses in Gelibolu (Gallipoli). According to Sengor, a quake of this magnitude can not result from a fault shorter than 100 km. This means that the charted fault that runs along the Izmit Gulf at the eastern edge of the Sea of Marmara must continue under the sea somewhere very close to Istanbul and the southern entrance of the Bosphorus. Previous clusters of quakes charted by Finkel have followed a three-stage pattern, striking first near Adi Pazari to the east of the Gulf, then along the Marmara itself, then in the Gelibolu Peninsula.

Anatolia's history of seismic activity, Prof. Sengor emphasized throughout his lecture, had not received the attention it warranted. Sultan Abdulhamid II commissioned a seismic study of the Marmara that was carried out by a Russian team aboard a ship called the *Salonik* around the turn of the century. (This seems to be a rare instance of Abdulhamid's legendary paranoia serving the

interest of his subjects.) Incredibly, this study was ignored by the Ottomans; Turkish geologists and seismologists first learned about its existence just three years ago from a Russian geologist who happened to mention it when attending a conference in Istanbul.

An Austrian did a geological survey of the area in 1924 and in 1940 a refugee from the Nazis undertook a study that, interestingly, was commissioned by the Soviets. In 1948 he concluded that there must be a fault running from NE Anatolia to the eastern Mediterranean coast. Because of the complacency of Turkish science, said Prof. Sengor, this fault was not identified until 1971.

After the August quake the French ambassador invited Prof. Sengor to lunch and asked him for recommendations for how to spend money that French President Jacques Chirac had earmarked for post-quake aid. Sengor recommended funding a study to chart the fault that must exist just south of Istanbul. Knowing its exact location will allow planners to determine how far the likely source of the next big quake will be from the structures they're trying to protect. "If this area were occupied by a civilized nation," thundered Prof. Sengor, "we would have known about the faults under the Marmara years ago. Unfortunately this is not the case."

Sengor predicted a big quake — of a magnitude between 7.5 and 8 on the Richter scale — will strike near Istanbul in 10 to 20 years — or tomorrow. Three days after his lecture a quake measuring 4.4 on the Richter scale struck just south of Istanbul. It happened in the middle of the night, jolting me awake when I was just about to drop off to sleep. Prof. Sengor concluded on a pessimistic note: "Turks have a long history of not listening to nature — they may do it again."

After seeing how public rage at government negligence has dissipated with no appreciable effect, one may be tempted to say that Turkey's geology is more dynamic than the political culture of its current inhabitants — an irresistible force meeting an immovable object. If the evolution of accountability in Turkey can not keep up with the annual two centimeter creep of its bit of the earth's crust, I shudder to imagine the horrors that will follow the quake that's coming soon to this city of over 12 million.

The sentence above is how I'd intended to conclude this report. I was giving a final read-through in a fifth-floor bar in the city center when the building began to sway. For the 30 seconds it lasted, I felt almost paralyzed by fear. According to initial news reports, this quake measured 7.2 on the Richter scale and left 245 dead and some 2,500 injured. The good news is that the response of the Army and both government and volunteer rescue teams has been quick and efficient. Turkey may yet outpace its geology, but its trials seem destined to continue. □

Author: Mason, Whitney
Title: ICWA Letters-Europe/Russia
ISSN: 1083-4273

Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: Sub-Saharan Africa;
East Asia, South Asia,
Mideast/North; Africa;
The Americas

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4273) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net

Fax: (603) 643-9599

Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin

Program Administrator: Gary L. Hansen

Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

©1999 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation.
The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

Institute of Current World Affairs

THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION

Four West Wheelock Street

Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 USA