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The Effects of Two Major Earthquakes in Türkiye: An Example of Burying the Dead

Türkiye'deki İki Büyük Deprem Etkileri: Ölülerin Gömülmesi Örneği

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In the first quarter of the 21st century, an earthquake centred in Pazarcık (Kahramanmaraş) with a magnitude of 7.7 occurred in 06/02/2023 at 04:17:34 am (GMT+3) and was followed by a second earthquake centred in Elbistan (Kahramanmaraş) with a magnitude of 7.6 on 06/02/2023 at 01:24:47 pm (GMT+3). The number of the casualties in Kahramanmaraş, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adıyaman, Osmaniye, Hatay, Kilis, Malatya, and Elazığ provinces, as a consequence of these two different and major earthquakes, was announced as 45.089 on the official website of Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) on the date of this paper, 03/03/2023⁽¹⁾. World Health Organization stated that they are ready to support Turkish Republic Ministry of Health in terms of emergency humanitarian aid in 6 February 2023, the date the incidents took place, after the devastating earthquakes occurred in the southeast of Türkiye⁽²⁾.

At this stage, cases such as identification of a number of bodies simultaneously to bury the dead, carrying the body, and burying regarding the belief were encountered. Regarding the sociocultural perspective in Türkiye, it has been needed to find solutions for this. The AFAD was founded

in line with presidential decree no. 4 on the organization of the institutions and organizations associated, related and affiliated to the ministry and other institutions and organizations to improve and implement policies on taking precautions to implement services effectively on civil defence and disasters and emergencies in Türkiye; facilitating coordination between the institutions and organizations that will planned to manage preparation and reduction of risk before the incidents, interference during the incidents and rehabilitation works after the incidents; organization and coordination of domestic and external humanitarian aid operations⁽³⁾. Interference of AFAD was needed for the earthquake occurred in 06/02/2023 at 04:17. AFAD published 29 press releases and one public statement on its official website with the title of "Press Release on Earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş" until 11/02/2023 when the article was written⁽⁴⁾.

It was stated in the public statement (08/02/2023) "...It has been deemed suitable to bury the bodies which could not be identified by recognition or forensics and could not be delivered to their relatives in five days after being pulled from the wreckage in accordance with religious obligations,



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within the framework of the joint evaluation of the public prosecutor's office and the local authority, after taking DNA, fingerprint samples, and photographs; and to record it by stating the location of the grave"⁽⁵⁾.

Another statement on the subject was made by the high council of religious affairs, the highest decision and advisory body of the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Türkiye.

According to the decision of this body, it is allowed to bury the deceased without being washed or shrouded although this is not proper to the religion. "Shrouding the body is fard al-kifayah for all Muslims. As is known, shrouding is done with three pieces of cloth for men and five pieces of cloth for women under normal conditions. If there is not enough shroud cloth for this, shrouding is done with two pieces of cloth for men and three pieces of cloth for women. If these are not available a cloth to cover the whole body will be enough for the shroud. (Müslim, Cenâiz, 44) In such a case, there is no difference between the shrouding of men and women. If a material such as a shroud or cloth cannot be found or cannot be used for other reasons, it is also appropriate to bury the body by assuming a body bag as a shroud"⁽⁶⁾.

Considering the relatives of those who died of natural disasters as a sensitive and fragile group, burial of the body in accordance with the accepted standards according to religious necessities and traditions in usual times should be seen as a human right rather than a request. However, because of the chaos and lots of deaths after a natural disaster, mass burial is also acceptable when necessary. Suggestions of organized religions and their representatives should be aimed at finding solutions to these urgent situations so that an ethical and moral approach should be adopted. Thus, it becomes easier to overcome the social trauma experienced.

It is an important ethical and legal issue to accept the existence of man in nature as a value and to consider this after death in terms of body integrity and body immunity. In this respect, it is normal to request the burial process of the human body within the framework of certain religious procedures. However, requests are always limited by possibilities.

It should not be forgotten that family members who experience a grieving process in mass deaths in natural disasters are vulnerable groups. Therefore, it can be difficult for them to accept burial in mass graves. While analyzing the situation with psychological, sociological, moral, and legal consequences, people's belief systems should not be ignored. In such major disasters, health and religious authorities should work together, take the joint action to solve this sensitive issue, and prevent disinformation.

A number of customs, rituals, ceremonies, religious and in some places magical activities, which are performed in three important "transitional" periods in human life as "birth", "marriage", and "death", cluster and manage these transitions⁽⁷⁾. Our wish is that after the two major earthquakes in Türkiye, efforts should be made to ensure that the burial process, which is one of the rituals of the transitional period, is carried out in accordance with the necessary cultural and religious standards, and that this happens under appropriate materials and conditions. To clear up the conscientious trauma and confusion, it should be ensured that the decisions taken for now are not questioned later. It should be emphasized that when issuing a fatwa by a competent authority on religious issues, the statement that a body bag can be used instead of a shroud can create a dilemma due to different opinions, and it is important to reach an adequate and complete agreement on this issue.

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