

Earthquakes

A year ago, in February 2022, after a prolonged, but much denied, build-up of military forces and equipment along many of the borders between Russia and Ukraine, President Putin launched his Special Military Operation. He expected the operation to be quick and decisive. The Ukrainians were either willing to be deceived by his insistence that there was nothing abnormal about to hit them, or resigned to the thought of a brief but damaging war as it loomed over the borders. But it was not a totally unexpected event when it came.

A year later, in January 2023, after decades of relatively mild tectonic activity an enormous and totally unannounced earthquake hit a vast area of southern Turkey and also a north- western corner of Syria, already devastated by years of civil war and brutal oppression by Bashir Al-Assad, supported by Putin's military might.

Journalists who have been covering the events in both areas cannot help but notice the parallels. The devastation caused by bombing is terrible to see on news reports, but worse to witness as they also try to reflect the daily lives of those under attack. "In a war zone there is tension and fear, anger and sadness for what the civilians are suffering" says Lorenzo Tondo. "But in a natural disaster, things are totally different. No one is prepared. Earthquakes hit suddenly. Lives have been destroyed in a few seconds by something that humans cannot control."

The devastation caused by bombing is in theory targeted. The damage is deliberate and, again theoretically, not aimed at civilians, though much of the destruction caused by Russian bombing of Ukraine has indeed appeared to be intended to frighten and demoralise the civilian population.

Severe earthquakes cause a devastation that can seem total, destroying whole villages and towns in minutes. In some ways they are completely indiscriminate, leaving buildings new or old, poor or luxurious, as heaps of rubble that may or may not yield survivors to the rescuers who struggle to clear the mounds of broken concrete and twisted iron reinforcements. The Turkish Government has been criticised for its slow response, but it did have official teams that could gradually join the international rescue efforts. But their task is enormous.

The situation in Syria is even more desperate. Turkey is a 'western' country with a good standard of living. The northern regions of Syria have already been devastated by war, and in some places the years of conflict have left towns already flattened but with no Government response for political reasons. Poverty already rules the streets and people have low expectations despite all their aspirations and hopes. After years of airstrikes the first reaction to the shaking of the ground is that another air attack is happening. But this is already a place where people who have lost everything have sought refuge and escape. Displaced by war, what little was left to them has been turned upside down again, and there is nowhere else to go. They have no services and barely any access to international aid.

Our contributions to Disaster Emergency Committee appeals are vital – but a mere drop in the ocean of what will be needed to restore normality and rebuild confidence after this tragedy. Although the media have moved on to other issues, the people who have lost so much are still there in miserable conditions and need our support. Unitarians have over the years supported the Red Cross many times in their disaster relief work around the world. Let us not forget the need this time.

