

Earthquakes in Turkey and Syria affect the WUR community too

# ‘THERE IS A LOT OF GRIEF AND TRAUMA TO DEAL WITH’

Bedir Tekinerdogan is the chair-holding professor of Applied Information Science. But for now, after the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, he is above all a son-in-law, brother-in-law, cousin and uncle. The disaster hit his home area, where many relatives still live. Text Marieke Enter

**A** few flashes of memory are all Tekinerdogan retains from his earliest childhood in Turkey. But he was only four when the family followed his father to the Netherlands. Before that, they lived in a village near Besni, in the Adiyaman region – less than 80 kilometres from the epicentre of two devastating earthquakes in early February. He used to visit the area regularly, and was last there in the Christmas holidays, visiting his in-laws. His uncles and aunts, his wife’s parents,

her sisters and their families all live there. Or rather, used to live there.

Tekinerdogan was up early that particular morning so he soon saw the news reports about the quake. Worried, he WhatsApped the family in Turkey to ask if they were all right. Yes, we are fine, they reported one by one. ‘At first I was relieved: ah, they are unharmed and it’s all okay,’ Tekinerdogan said. ‘Only later, when they sent photos of their totally destroyed homes, did I realize that all was not well at all. And that “fine” is a relative term in such a massive disaster. That in this context it meant: “we have

lost everything and the suffering here is indescribable, but we are still alive”.’

## Dystopian

Tekinerdogan’s family were lucky. When the ground began to shake, they were able to reach the ground floor in time to escape outside, or they were lucky enough to live in a building that remained standing. What followed were dystopian days, in Tekinerdogan’s words. No gas, no electricity, no drinking water. Sleeping in the car at night. No emergency services yet (‘this disaster is really too big for one country’). And devastation and misery everywhere. The children are particularly badly traumatized, says the professor. ‘My sister-in-law told me that her 12-year-old daughter cried non-stop for days. Her 8-year-old brother, by contrast, did not utter a word for four days. The problem

### Bake sale fundraiser

Istanbul-born Çilga Buse Kızılay, a Master’s student in Urban Environmental Management, organized a bake sale at The Spot in Orion last week with five other Turkish students, featuring traditional Turkish dishes such as börek and baklava. ‘Istanbul is a long way from the earthquake zone. But everyone knows people affected by the earthquake,’ she says.

In the year and a half she has been living in Wageningen, Kızılay got to know only one other Turkish student. ‘Until the earthquake. Since then, I have got to know more than 60 other Wageningen residents with a Turkish background who are helping with the bake sale. We met through the tragedy.’

The proceeds will go towards helping the victims. But there is another side to the bake sale too. ‘It is a Turkish tradition to eat together,’ says Kızılay. ‘We want to share that with the Wageningen community. In addition, it is an opportunity for Turkish students to get together. It is tough being so far from home when such a massive disaster takes place there. You don’t feel quite so alone if you can share your worries and fears with others who are feeling the same way.’ LZ

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is not just material, but also mental. Nobody knows what to do next. There is a lot of grief and trauma to deal with.' The family are safe now; they were able to go to acquaintances on Turkey's southern coast. And what about Tekinerdogan himself; how is he doing? 'Mentally I feel strong, although I did take about three days off in that first week. As a chair holder, I am normally on the go all day, but my mind really wasn't on my work then. I wanted to make time to help people, to call and reassure them and ask what they need. The human dimension had to be the priority now. That was a good decision, and helpful for my wife, who was extremely upset. It is quite something when your nearest

and dearest are going through something so unimaginably terrible.'

### Adopted country – home country

The professor feels supported by the tremendous response from the Netherlands. From expressions of sympathy from WUR colleagues and students to the nearly 90 million euros raised by the national 555 fundraising campaign. 'I am proud of that. My adopted country taking care of my home country, that warms my heart.'

This disaster puts life in a new perspective, Tekinerdogan believes. 'I'm crying inside, but at the same time I accept that suffering and grief are part of life - maybe even sent to try us. You can be very despairing or you can fight it, but that doesn't help. This dis-



**Bedir Tekinerdogan**  
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aster proves that you should cherish good fortune and be grateful for what you have - it can be gone in a flash. My philosophy in life has always been that human beings are vulnerable. I've never been keen on the so-called self-made types who think they're the centre of the world. Just do your best, be a good person and do something of value for the world. It is not about money or status and there is more to life than material things. The really important things in life are not things.' ■

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The situation after the earthquake in the Turkish city of Iskenderun • Photo FreelanceJournalist/Shutterstock.com