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Death toll from devastating twin quakes in SE Turkey, NW Syria exceeds 36,000; Greek FM Dendias visits area



The death toll across Turkey and Syria following last Monday's catastrophic earthquakes has exceeded 36,000.

The death toll in Turkey reached nearly 32,000, the Turkish Emergency Coordination Center announced on Monday, while fatalities in northwest Syria exceeded 4,500, rebel groups in the devastated northwest corner of the country claimed. Another 1,400 deaths were reported in government-controlled parts of Syria.

In a related development, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias arrived in the ravaged Hatay province of southern Turkey on Sunday for a lighting visit, with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu greeting him at the Adana airport and accompanying him to Antakya, ancient and glorious Antioch, amongst the hardest hit cities.

Speaking before waiting television cameras and with Çavuşoğlu by his side, Dendias first expressed pride for the Greek search and rescue specialists that "...helped Turkish society and the Turkish people in this difficult hour."

He also conveyed the heartfelt condolences of the Greek people, government and PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the Turkish government and people, for the victims of the devastating twin earthquakes that struck last Monday.

Dendias underlined that Athens will continue to support and assist the Turkish people, both on a national level and within the EU framework.

In turn, Çavuşoğlu stressed that "...we shouldn't wait for natural disasters in order to improve our relations."

He again thanked the Greek side for the support and solidarity, adding that good-neighborly relations become apparent in such trying times.

Meanwhile, two specialized search and rescue teams sent to Turkey by Athens returned to Greece on Sunday evening.

In a related development, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, on Sunday afternoon met at the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. George with Orthodox Christian parishioners who hail from the quake-affected areas.

In a brief address, His All Holiness praised the contribution of Greece's disaster rescue units and the humanitarian aid collected in Greece and continuing to arrive in Turkey.

The Shephard of the Mother Church later officiated at a Trisagion memorial service for the repose of the souls of the victims, amid an emotionally charged service.