

One year on, Turkish quake survivors hard to say goodbye to life in "floating cities"

HATAY/ISKENDERUN, Türkiye, Feb. 13 (Xinhua) -- Ikbal Topuksakal's husband recently celebrated his 90th birthday at the "floating city" of Suheyla Sultan ship docked in Türkiye's quake-hit Hatay province.

The old couple moved to the vessel in April 2023 after their apartment building was severely damaged in the massive earthquakes wreaking havoc in southern Türkiye on Feb. 6 last year.

"We have made this vessel our home," Ikbal told Xinhua in a recent interview on the occasion of the first anniversary of the earthquake.

"Meals are offered here per day. We receive excellent health services with health workers available all the time, and our medicines are delivered to our door," she said.

The ship was among two accommodation barges offered by Karadeniz Holding, a Turkish energy company, to Hatay's Iskenderun port to house earthquake survivors, shortly after the catastrophic earthquake.

As Suheyla Sultan is being used as a residential shelter, Rauf Bey has been converted into a boarding school for 500 students and 41 teachers.

However, according to the protocol reached between the company and local authorities, both ships have to cease operation after June.

"What will we do then?" lamented Ikbal.

Currently, some 1,000 people live in Suheyla Sultan.

Nadire Satir, 64, moved to Suheyla Sultan with her two grown-up children shortly after the earthquake destroyed 80 percent of her neighborhood.

"Feb. 6 is a day that will never be forgotten ... I don't want to sound cliches, but our pain is enormous," Satir told Xinhua.

"We could have rented an apartment, but we could not overcome our fear of earthquakes," she said. "Here at sea, we do not feel any aftershocks," Satir said while praising the family environment on the ship.

Zeynep Sahin, head of education coordination for the "floating school" Rauf Bey, told Xinhua that teachers live with their families on the vessel, but students, whose families mostly live in "container cities," can go home on weekends.

"The six-story Rauf Bey consists of 23 classrooms, computer labs, social areas, and a dormitory with a capacity of 1,200 beds," Sahin stated. "In terms of the educational process and access to resources, our students have no problems."

The students on board are preparing for high school and university entrance exams.

A powerful 7.8-magnitude earthquake jolted southern Türkiye and Syria at midnight on Feb. 6, followed by a 7.7-magnitude one the next afternoon.

In Türkiye, the quakes devastated 11 provinces, killing more than 53,000 people and displacing millions, with Hatay being the worst-hit province.