

International

40 dead as families pulled from Albania quake rubble

Rescuers hoping for more survival stories

DURRES, Albania: The death toll from the most powerful earthquake to strike Albania in decades rose to 40 yesterday after more bodies were pulled from the wreckage overnight in a tragedy that has wiped out whole families. The 6.4 magnitude earthquake rocked the Balkan state while people were sleeping just before 4:00 am (0300 GMT) on Tuesday, razing buildings and trapping victims beneath the debris in towns near the Adriatic coast.

Rescue teams were still shovelling away massive chunks of collapsed apartments and hotels in the coastal city of Durres, where nearly 30 buildings were badly damaged. Teams from around Europe have flown in to help with the effort, bringing dogs and specialized cameras to hunt for survivors, around 50 of whom have been pulled out alive, mostly on Tuesday.

As the operation stretched into day three, rescuers insisted there was still reason to hope for more survival stories. "There may be hope for up to eight or ten days" for victims to live after an earthquake, Captain Joel Leroy, a French rescuer, told AFP. His team of around 50 was searching for two people believed to be buried at the site of seven-story building in Durres, where two or three floors toppled over and sunk into the ground. Victims may still be in "survival pockets" of air that allow them to breathe under the rubble, he explained. "That's why we are working so hard, we believe in it," he added.

Search efforts ceased yesterday in the other hard-hit town of Thumane, where the defense ministry said there were no more missing after

more than 20 bodies were pulled out in recent days. During the night, emergency workers uncovered the corpses of a mother and son from the Recj family, found in an embrace. They were crushed by the weight of a collapsed six-storey building in Durres. The whole family has now perished in the quake, with the bodies of a father and daughter pulled out the day before, according to Ilir Duka, an Albanian rescuer at the scene.

Similar tragedies have befallen other families as the pre-dawn quake shattered their homes. Loved ones have watched on in horror as rescuers pulled out bodies covered in a grey film of dust, many in their pyjamas. On Tuesday a woman was heard crying out from inside a wrecked building, where she was stuck inside with a dead child. She was eventually rescued but later died in hospital.

'Hope dies last'

Around 50 survivors have been hospitalized and are "in a state of shock and worried about their loved ones", defense ministry spokeswoman Albana Qehajaj told AFP. The number of people who may still be buried in the rubble is unknown. Rescuers, helped by teams from across Europe, have been working in perilous conditions as hundreds of aftershocks rattle buildings, interrupting search efforts.

"It's a heavy operation, but that's why we're here, we've been doing this for a long time," said an Italian rescue worker who didn't give his name. "Hope dies last," he said, adding that survivors have been found up to four days after an earthquake in some instances. The Italian team was



DURRES, Albania: Rescue teams and firefighters carry a victim found under the rubble of a collapsed building yesterday. —AFP

working with dogs to search on a flattened four-storey house that belonged to the Lala family and their relatives. Two toddlers and their mother were among those who have not yet been found in the debris, their neighbor Fatmira, dressed in black and whispering through tears, told AFP.

Moved to hotels

Thousands of people have been displaced, either because their homes were severely damaged or were still unsafe because of the continuing af-

tershocks. On Wednesday night authorities in Durres moved those who had been sleeping in tents to hotels and a sports centre. Prime Minister Edi Rama has promised to rehouse the newly homeless by next year. Illegal construction is rife in Albania, where chaotic development exploded after the fall of communism in 1990. Many buildings lack proper permits and do not adhere to safety codes. The earthquake was the deadliest in several decades in Albania, which lies near a tectonic fault line. —AFP

The mysterious reappearance of Turkey's missing

ANKARA: News that a loved one was in custody would be unwelcome in most circumstances - but when the police called Sumeyye Yilmaz, she felt her prayers had been answered. Her husband Mustafa Yilmaz had been missing for eight months. At last, she knew he was alive and she would see him again. But she could not take in the news, asking the officer on the phone if he was sure. "There are many Mustafa Yilmazes, I didn't want to be disappointed," she told AFP. The next day, he was finally back in her arms.

Police told Sumeyye that her husband was "found" on Oct 21 and was in good health, but she could see he had lost weight and his hands and face were "ice cold". Sumeyye feared her husband, a 33-year-old physiotherapist, had been tortured and said he looked anemic, but he gave no account of his missing months and told her only that he had been "hiding". She knew this was untrue: He had just started a new job when he vanished on Feb 19 and had no reason to disappear.

'Enforced disappearances'

Ozturk Turkdogan of campaign group Human Rights Association told AFP a unit within the security services was likely to be behind 28 disap-



ANKARA: Wife and daughter of Mustafa Yilmaz, who was missing for eight months, Sumeyye Yilmaz and her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, look at a family picture on Nov 21, 2019. —AFP

pearances recorded since a failed coup in 2016. Similar techniques were used by agents against suspected political dissidents in the 1990s. Turkdogan said the 28 were probably abducted to obtain information, though it was unclear why they would have been singled out - tens of thousands were arrested in a post-coup crackdown. The interior ministry and police did not respond to requests for comment on the cases.

Mustafa had already been sentenced to six years in prison over links to the Gulen movement - a religious organization that Turkey blamed for the failed coup - but he had been released at the start of the year pending an appeal. He was one of six men who disappeared within a few days of each other around the country in February - all with alleged ties to the Gulenists. Four of the six reappeared in July in police custody. —AFP

Dutchman in cult case 'sexually abused children'

THE HAGUE: A Dutch man accused of sequestering his family in a farmhouse for nearly a decade is suspected of sexually abusing two of his children, prosecutors said yesterday. The two children were not among the six living on the farm in the village of Ruinerwold at the time and had previously left home, the Dutch prosecution service said. Prosecutors also confirmed that the suspect was the father of all six of the children who were being kept on the farm at the time of his arrest in October.

"In addition to money laundering and deprivation of liberty and mistreatment of his nine children, the 67-year-old man is also suspected of sexually abusing two of his three oldest children," the prosecution service said in a statement. "DNA kinship research has

shown that the six children from the farm in Ruinerwold have the same father and mother and that the 67-year-old suspect is the father," it said, adding that the mother died in 2004.

The Dutch suspect and an Austrian man were both arrested in October and remain in custody. The family was first discovered when the oldest son still living on the farm walked into a local bar in a confused state and raised concern about the welfare of his other siblings. Police then went to the farmhouse and found the other five children locked in a small room.

In a further twist to the case, the prosecutors added that the Dutchman and the Austrian had held another Austrian man, aged 69, captive "for several months" in 2009. "More details will not be shared about the case. The investigation is still in full swing," the prosecutors said. Both suspects and the family were all part of South Korea's controversial Unification Church, dubbed "Moonies" after their late founder Sun Myung Moon, Dutch media have said. The Universal Peace Federation, the name the church now goes by, has confirmed that the father of the family was a member in the 1980s before leaving for Germany where "we lost sight of him". —AFP