

# 51 killed in Turkey quake

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**OKULAR:** A strong, pre-dawn earthquake struck eastern Turkey yesterday, killing 51 people as it knocked down stone and mud-brick houses and minarets in at least six villages, the government said.

The earthquake surprised many residents as they slept, crumpling buildings into piles of rubble. Panicked survivors fled into the narrow village streets, some climbing out of windows, as more than 50 aftershocks measuring up to 5.5 and 5.3 magnitude rattled the region.

The Kandilli seismology centre said the 6.0-magnitude quake hit at 4.32am near the village of Basyurt in a remote, sparsely populated area of Elazig province. The region is 550km east of here.

The government initially put the death toll at 57 but later lowered it to 51 with no explanation. In addition to the deaths, 34 people were being treated for injuries, the crisis centre said.

The worst-hit area was here, where 19 of the village's 900 residents were killed.

As relatives rushed in for news of their loved ones, authorities blocked off the area so ambulances and rescue teams could manoeuvre on the village's narrow, steep roads. Residents lit fires to keep warm in the winter cold, with snow-covered mountains in the background.

"The village is totally flattened," village administrator Hasan Demirdag told private NTV television.

Video footage showed men using shovels and their bare hands to dig up two bodies from piles of dry dirt and concrete blocks from wrecked houses. Both bodies were covered in blankets and carried away. One appeared to be that of a young child.

Another 13 people were killed in the nearby village of Yukari Demirci, Gov Muammer Erol said, adding that by noon everyone had been removed from the rubble.

"Everything has been knocked down, there is not a stone in place," said Yadin Apaydin, administrator for the village of Yukari Kanatli, where he said at least three people died.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Kandilli Observatory's director, Mustafa Erdik, urged residents not to enter any damaged homes, warning they could topple from aftershocks that Erdik said could last for days.

Erdogan blamed the region's mud-brick buildings for the many deaths and said the government housing agency would build quake-proof homes in the area.

The quake was also felt in the neighbouring provinces of Tunceli, Bingol and Diyarbakir, where residents fled to the streets in panic and stayed outdoors. — AP



Residents scavenging for their belongings in Okular, a village in Elazig province, yesterday. — Reuters picture