

Opinion

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Lebanon shares much of Turkey's tectonic frailty

by Chibli Mallat

We are not talking about a mysterious land in Latin America, or a Southeast Asian principality. Disaster has struck a few hundred kilometers north of our capital, with perhaps 40,000 deaths, and a lot of criticism of the Turkish government. It took five days for help to reach some devastated villages in the neighborhood of Izmit.

It is difficult to judge the performance from afar, and the commentators in the Financial Times might be right about the need to help now and leave criticism for later. But one should remember the Kobe disaster a few years ago in order to realize that no less powerful an earthquake resulted in 10 or 20 times fewer casualties. Same in

San Francisco. An earthquake is an act of God. But in terms of the efficiency of relief operations after disaster strikes, and in terms of preventive measures in adequate building and urban planning for areas with tectonic histories like Turkey's, mankind is not as helpless as a few decades ago.

Which brings me to exactly such a nearby case, which is Lebanon. In terms of relief, we might not be particularly well-suited to help. But one should look at our southern enemy to realize how much its rapid relief action has helped its reputation worldwide. Even cynics among us should look at the political value of such manifestations and help charter a boat or a plane with food, drugs, blankets, anything to say we care.

It might be time to fill that Foreign Ministry post to relieve our over-stretched

prime minister. More importantly, however, it is time to appreciate that Lebanon shares much of the tectonic frailty of the Turkish fault-lines. Seismography is not my forte, but the Lebanese memory is still vivid with the tremors the country was subjected to only a couple of years ago. The question is, if such an earthquake were to occur in Lebanon with the strength and duration of the Turkish disaster, what would the government do?

That, actually, would be a good topic for government and opposition alike, and a perfectly constructive issue for our leaders on both sides of the barrier. So, dear prime minister, perhaps you could tell us what is available if something like this happens, and what we should do with our children and our homes, whom to contact, who would be in charge, at what level and so

forth. How about a little national drill? And, dear opposition, where is question time on this issue, and why are we paying taxes to keep up 128 legislators in their elegant Nijmeh settings? Surely our former prime minister will volunteer some of his generosity for relief if disaster strikes, but he can do better as a statesman. With his allies, he could start raising these issues in Parliament and in the media.

Or should civil society look after its own again, and create its own private disaster group to step instead of those in government and opposition who are again not doing their jobs?

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