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## Turkey-Syria earthquake: Fr Bahjat (parish priest Aleppo), more tremors last night. "It's a tragedy, we have to restart from scratch"

"I keep asking myself how much longer this ordeal is going to last": said the Latin parish priest of Aleppo, Father **Bahjat Karakach**, in his first remarks to SIR after quakes of 6.4 and 5.8 magnitude hit Turkey and Syria within minutes of each other last night. The parish priest reported scenes of widespread panic throughout the city, while local media reported that residents had jumped off balconies and terraces in an effort to flee, with four people were killed in the stampede caused by the tremors. The Latin parish church opened its doors to earthquake survivors since the first quake of February 6, providing shelter, food and assistance. Approximately 500 people are receiving assistance from the friars in the parish premises. "It's a nightmare, - says Father Bahjat -. We relived the night of February 6. People in Aleppo are in a state of shock and panic. Now we have to restart from scratch. We expect other aftershocks to occur, after which we will make a new assessment of residential buildings' habitability. The situation does not look good, because the houses that were damaged in the previous quake now risk collapsing altogether", he said. "All of Aleppo is in the streets," confirmed **Elia Kajmini**, a theatre director and author whose house collapsed and is now volunteering at the Terra Sancta College, located on the outskirts of the city. Just like the parish, the educational institute of the Custody of the Holy Land has been housing and helping more than 2,000 homeless persons since February 6. "Those who had returned to their homes - the director told SIR - are now stranded outdoors in a state of shock. Many have returned here but there is no more room, not even in the parking lots. People are sleeping in their vehicles. Thousands are flocking to the Institute's outdoor premises. Inside, people are crowded in the corridors, there are no more chairs, they were all taken. People prefer to stay outside in the cold rather than stay indoors. We are facing a catastrophe." **Franciscan friars leaving to serve as voluntary workers.** Despite so many difficulties, the Syrian Church in Aleppo and in other earthquake-hit towns such as Latakia, Tartous and Hama, remains steadfast in its commitment. "We painfully heard the news of the earthquake in Turkey and in our country, that is Syria, already plagued by 12 years of war. This earthquake has added more pain to an open wound. We are going there to help our confreres and to offer our support to the people, helping out in whatever is needed." The twin brothers **George** and **Johnny Jallouf** are both Franciscan friars of the Custody of the Holy Land. They left for Aleppo with another confrere last February 15. They are members of the first of several "teams" of Franciscan friars from the Custody who will take turns over the coming weeks to bring help to the local population and to their confreres, who have been tirelessly helping quake survivors since February 6th, the day of the earthquake. The news had been announced by the Custos of the Holy Land, Father **Francesco Patton**, and it was further confirmed through the **Christian Media Centre (CMC)**: "Some of our young confreres will take turns to offer relief services. I will attempt to visit the friars myself as soon as possible, to encourage the friars and to encourage the people. I have light luggage: a few personal items, some supplies for those who have lost everything. But above all hope," the Custos pointed out. "I was impressed by their generous service to the people," Patton explained. " They have never prioritised self-interest or personal safety over doing good and helping other people." **Open parishes.** To support this effort, "the friars are asking for prayers and donations to be sent through the appropriate channels, made available by the Custody and Pro Terra Sancta, in order to meet the needs of what is still an emergency phase." As known, the Custody of the Holy Land is promoting a fundraising campaign for Syria through the Pro Terra Sancta Association and the Custody's treasury. Financial support will be used to help the Syrian friars buy basic necessities that are vital in this critical period.



the friars of the Latin parish of Aleppo keep the doors of the parish open, sheltering homeless families whose dwellings were destroyed in the earthquake. "We do our best to be strong and respond to the needs of survivors to the best of our abilities," the friars made known on social media. The friars succeed in serving more than 4,000 meals every day. Keeping the rooms warm for children and the elderly is the challenge they are facing in this cold season. **Monsignor Gugerotti's visit.** Monsignor **Claudio Gugerotti**, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches, arrived in Aleppo for a visit these past few days ( February 17-21). The purpose of the visit, the Dicastery explained, was to "convey the Holy Father's closeness to the people severely affected by the recent devastating earthquake and to meet with the Bishops and Caritas workers and other bodies dedicated to bringing relief to the suffering people." **Caritas Syria.** Caritas Syria is likewise providing continued assistance to the population. The Aleppo branch has handed out 4150 food packages and hygiene kits to hardest-hit families. Over the past few days, also in Aleppo, Caritas workers distributed medicines to the worst-affected patients as well as bottles of milk for children, assisted by medical doctors and pharmacists. **Humanitarian aid from the international community flowing in.** Dozens of aid convoys reached Syria by land and via air cargo charters that departed from several Arab countries such as the Emirates, Oman, and Jordan. Local media sources as well as the National Observatory for Human Rights in Syria reported a massive flow of foreign aid reaching the areas controlled by the central government in Damascus and in the northwestern districts under Turkish influence that were severely affected by the earthquake. European Commission spokeswoman **Dana Spinant**, announced yesterday that the EU Commission and the Swedish Presidency of the Council "will host a Donors' Conference on 16 March in Brussels to raise resources and coordinate a response to support Turkey and Syria. The Conference will be open to EU Members, neighbours, UN members, international financial institutions and relevant stakeholders."

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