

People Never Die of Natural Disasters, They Die of Precarity and Marginalisation. The Fourth Pan-Africa Newsletter (2023)



What remains of a building in Ait Abouz. Image by Emilie Madi.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental Pan-Africa**.

Fatna, a seventy-nine-year-old woman from Marrakech, was shaken awake late on Friday 8 September at 11pm. She cried in panic and bewilderment as she watched the walls of her home crack from the unexpected seismic waves. After escaping to safety, she took a moment to pray for her good fortune – a stroke of luck that thousands of people did not have that night.

Hundreds of thousands have slept in the open air after a magnitude 7 earthquake hit several regions in Morocco. The epicentre was in Al-Haouz province in the middle of the Atlas Mountains where Tobkal, the second highest mountain in Africa, is located. The number of **fatalities** crossed the 2,900 mark, while more than 300,000 civilians, including 100,000 children, have been **affected**. The mountainous provinces of Al-Haouz and Taroudant, which suffered the main casualties, are both known for poor housing conditions in the form of many marginalised villages built mainly with clay.

Seismologists **state** that this earthquake should not have caused such severe damage and high number of fatalities. Despite hitting a 7 on the Richter scale, similar to the Turkey-Syria earthquake of 7.8, the faultline of the Morocco earthquake was 10 times smaller than the Turkey-Syria earthquake. It was much weaker in strength and radiated significantly less energy.

Additionally, the Richter scale cannot fully explain the disastrous effects of the El-Haouz earthquake as it only measures the strength of the earthquake at its source, independently of where the measurement is made. The scale of an earthquake's magnitude does not always accurately reflect its intensity. Consequently, seismists, geologists, and emergency planners use the Modified Mercalli Intensity (MMI) scale to assess the impact of the earthquakes on local environments and human activities.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) **calculated** the epicentre of the Morocco earthquake MMI as VIII which is characterised by 'severe' shaking, only two rankings below 'violent' and 'extreme' in the nine MMI categories. This measurement takes into consideration the severity of the damage for poorly built structures versus slight damage in buildings specially designed to withstand natural disasters; in other words, it takes into consideration that the poor will be the most affected.

The USGS also notes that while this region is highly vulnerable to earthquake disruption, the most vulnerable building types are adobe block dwellings and those constructed with unreinforced brick and mud, which will not support the slightest seismic tremors. Consequently, complete villages have collapsed while others have been destroyed or besieged by landslides and falling boulders. In short, it was not the seismic activity that killed people, it was the lack of proper living structures caused by precarity and marginalisation.

Not far away from Morocco, the death toll is estimated between 4,000 and 11,000 in Libya after Storm Daniel hit its coast and caused major damage, especially in Derna where two dams burst, resulting in the largest number of deaths. The north African country rich in oil and energy resources has endured a civil war and military conflict since the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) invasion in 2011.

Under the pretext of the UN-mandated Operation Unified Protector, NATO forces toppled the Muammar Gaddafi regime and threw the country into armed conflicts driven by the geopolitical interests of foreign powers, especially the US, the EU, and Turkey. Al-Bilad and Abu Mansour dams were the only rainwater reservoirs providing the mountainous city of Derna's 300,000 inhabitants with necessary water for drinking and agriculture. Both dams have not been **repaired** since 1986. NATO's military intervention and the imperialist armed conflict has diverted Libyans from addressing their infrastructural needs.



*Libyans protest over the deaths during the floods in Derna, demanding accountability from the government. Image from **Mustapha Hajji**.*

Hunger is another enemy of North African peoples. From **Morocco** and Algeria to Tunisia, ‘Bread Uprisings’ are a common occurrence and part of the shared experience of how popular struggles against hunger have shaped people’s histories and their collective memory. In 1864, Ali Ben Ghedhahem led a **massive insurrection** by Tunisian peasants and tribes against the government’s decree to raise taxes imposed on the impoverished tribes by the Ottoman Empire’s representative Sadiq Bey. The revolt was smashed but the legendary Ben Ghedhahem influenced the next generations’ struggles and the remembrance of him as ‘Bey of the People’ remained the driving spirit for Tunisians.

The continued scramble for Africa led by Western multinationals, governments, and militaries has maintained Africa’s subordination and curtailed our ability to overcome poverty, hunger and precarious conditions. As the situation deteriorated with the implementation of neoliberal policies and structural adjustment programs, 1981 witnessed the ‘Koumira Uprising’ one of the largest **urban insurrections** in the history of Morocco. The Royal Army intervened with live ammunition to counter peaceful protestors demanding a fair price for a *koumira*, a type of baguette that was the staple food of the poor of North Africa.

Today, one can see long lines of people at the doors of bakeries in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, all waiting for their turn to buy baguettes which have become insanely expensive and hard to find as the **economic** crisis deepens. Tunisia is a country rich in minerals, as well as marine and agricultural resources, but years of corruption and IMF programs have plunged the country into an economic and social crisis. Facing similar conditions, the Tunisian people launched the ‘Bread Revolt’ on 29 December right after the government of Mohamed Mzali announced a reduction of subsidies on basic products including bread to comply with IMF policy pressures.

People always rebel against conditions of degradation and deprivation. The fate of popular uprisings depends on their historical objectives and the subjective conditions of peoples' movements. The current political conjuncture and the challenges of peoples' struggles were the subject of the Dilemmas of Humanity regional conference in the Arab and Maghreb region which was held in the coastal town Hammamet, a one-hour drive from Tunis. From 1–4 September, around 100 activists from 12 countries – including political leaders, intellectuals and more than 50 popular movements – gathered to confront issues like the queuing hungry and people whose dwellings are so vulnerable to natural disasters.

The conference was a moment of exchange, socialising experiences of popular struggles and sharing perspectives on the following topics: political repression and the struggle for democratic freedoms, anti-imperialist youth struggles, capitalism and environmental crisis, food sovereignty and the right to land, the women's liberation struggle, and the trade union struggle. Finally, the conference concluded with commitments to a popular project of struggles against capitalism, imperialism and Zionism, for national liberation and building socialism, the only path to human emancipation and social justice.



Delegates gather at the opening ceremony of the regional conference of Dilemmas of Humanity, September 2023.

While one can easily give into despair, the dominant feelings amongst the peoples of the Maghreb are

underpinned by a sense of remaining steadfast in the face of tragedy. As ‘Oued El Bei Palm Tree’, a **poem** about the legendary uprising of phosphate workers in Alhaoud Al Manjemi at Gafsa city, Tunisia, in 2008, concludes: ‘The mountains may disappear, but my people will never disappear in a day.’ This is the feeling that continues to animate resistance in our people today.

Warmly,

Ghassane



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