Book Review


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Since the deadly earthquakes of 1999 in densely populated areas in Western Turkey and within the vicinity of the Istanbul metropolitan area, Turkey has taken several steps to first save and then aid the people in need in times of crisis. The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı) or AFAD its Turkish acronym was founded in 2009 to coordinate humanitarian aid in times of crisis and to prepare and educate public in order to reduce casualties when a disaster hits.

Surviving in Unusual Circumstances is one of the AFAD funded publications prepared by emergency management expert Doğan Gürer and edited by another expert on the same field, Mikdat Kadioğlu, a prominent professor of disaster management studies at Istanbul Technical University. Several disaster management experts and geological engineers are listed as contributors in the credits page as well. The book was written in an unconventional style and it appears like a mixture of academic work and a survival handbook. It is a perfect example of how academic knowledge may be implemented in practice. It is primarily written for the common Turkish reader and it largely avoids academic jargon except on a few occasions. The book has an introduction and five chapters. At the end it has a frequently asked questions section and a bibliography.

In the preface, AFAD president, Governor Mehmet Akif, refers to the 1999 earthquakes as important junctures in Turkey and highlights dire need to prepare for disasters in light of expert knowledge. Between the Preface and the Table of Contents, a one-page information about the history, mission, and goals of AFAD implicitly states purpose of the book.

After a brief international definition of disaster as recognized by the United Nations, the introduction states that the main propose of the book is to prepare the public for disasters and to increase the survival rate of victims. The authors state that after a disaster hits people can survive up to 72 hours. The book aims to guide people in this narrow timeframe so that they can take care of their basic needs from water, food, and emergency aid to hygiene.

The first chapter, “Unusual Conditions and Their Common Features”, starts with a general definition of unusual conditions along with their potential impacts. It lists three main causes of unusual conditions: natural disasters, such as earthquake, flooding, and storms; human-caused disasters, such as wars, migration and terrorism; technology-based disasters, such as accidents and radioactive leaks. The second part of the chapter focuses on physiological, psychological needs and states that awareness of limited resources in time of crisis increases people’s chance of survival.

Relying on the data collected from search and rescue teams, the second chapter, “Behavior Types in Earthquake,” informs reader about what to do before, during, and after an earthquake. The section highlights that people should seek a potential “life triangle,” a small air pocket in the rubble created by furniture in a house. Then, this section shows with illustrations how people should take certain positions when an earthquake occurs. After earthquakes, the chapter covers evacuation types from building
evacuation to regional evacuation. The chapter analyzes two types of evacuations; external and internal and explains which one is applied under which conditions. External evacuations are applied during an earthquake or fire, while internal evacuation is applied during a storm or radioactive leak. The authors caution why and how individual and collective evacuations should be done in an organized manner. One way to assure this organization is to make sure that every school, business, and house have an evacuation plan so that people know what to do before a disaster.

The third chapter, “Survival,” explains the ways one should act when a disaster happens and informs people about what to do when they are buried under the rubble after an earthquake. Also, this section touches upon such issues as how people should check themselves and what kind of positions they should take when they are trapped under the rubble. The person under the rubble has to fight against dust, electric wiring, broken glasses and even insects. Therefore, the comprehensive information given in this section is useful for everyone to deal with these problems.

The fourth chapter, “Assessment of Conditions,” gives considerably significant information about how an individual should assess conditions after a disaster. These conditions are examined in a hierarchy from individual and family conditions to the conditions of surrounding, structures, and infrastructure. The introductory part of chapter primarily focuses on assessment after earthquakes, but later it takes a more general approach including all types of disasters. The last part of the chapter provides guidance on how to assess needs and resources before and after a disaster and what needs should be prioritized over others.

The fifth chapter, “Fulfilling Basic Life Needs,” is the most detailed and perhaps the most useful one in the book. The chapter shows how people can fulfill their basic needs such as water, food, accommodation, and hygiene for at least 72 hours before any aid arrives. Preparation for a disaster starts before it hit so the authors suggest preparation of an emergency bag for each individual and what items should be included in it. Separately there should be an individual emergency aid kit for basic health needs. Moreover, the chapter shows the ways to satisfy basic needs when an emergency kit becomes insufficient and give some crucial information on how to set up tent and camp where to locate them conveniently. A useful part is the one that explains different water filtering technics with illustrations. Various charts gives measurements of bleach that can be used to disinfect water.

Although it is impossible to stop natural disasters from happening, it is possible to reduce and remove some of the damage they can bring about. Generally speaking, rather than being just a book for those who study or work in the field of emergency aid, this book is a diligent work from which everyone can benefit. It can help anyone to learn what to do in case of emergency until professional aid arrives. Overall, the book is a unique combination of academic knowledge with practical details. Its academic side, such as the definition of disaster according to UN, is not overwhelming for the common reader. There are plenty of books in English on the same subject but the translation of this book from Turkish to Arabic can be extremely useful especially for the millions of refugees living currently in Turkey.