When two powerful earthquakes hit Türkiye and Syria in February, Buthayna Elfaris experienced a devastating sense of déjà vu. With her home in Türkiye’s Hatay province destroyed, she and her family would have to start over—again.

Elfaris is originally from Syria, and in 2013, she, her husband, and baby son fled their home for Türkiye to escape the conflict in Syria. Formerly a teacher, she is working with Oxfam KEDV, the Oxfam affiliate in Türkiye, as an interpreter in Hatay province, supporting the immediate needs of people affected by the earthquakes. Now she’s one of hundreds of thousands of people left homeless in this province alone.

IN HER OWN WORDS
“Ten years ago, as rockets were fired and bombs dropped from planes onto my city, my husband and I made the heart-wrenching decision to leave our home in Syria with our baby.”

“When I first arrived here in Türkiye, I cried every day. But after two months, I started working in a school in an orphanage. I was teaching English to children who ... felt totally alone in the world. It made me feel better to be there for them, and they helped me, too.”

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“For refugees such as Elfaris, the earthquakes—the worst Türkiye has experienced in nearly a century—added another layer of instability to the lives they had slowly been rebuilding. According to the UN Refugee Agency, Türkiye hosts the largest number of refugees in the world, about 3.7 million people. In the provinces of Hatay, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa—three of the 11 provinces hit hardest—one out of every four or five people is a refugee.

“Every day, the seed of hope inside me grew. I wanted to build a house for my family, a place where my children could be happy and grow. I worked hard and was so proud to build my dream home. I planted a garden on our balcony that I nurtured and photographed every day.”

“But in February, in just a few minutes, that dream was shattered by the earthquake. I lost everything I’d built. Now, I’m living through the same challenges I experienced during the war all over again.”
"Now, my two sons (ages 9 and 11) are living with my parents and brother in Ankara [Türkiye], but I decided to stay in Hatay, because the people who need help are here. I’m working with Oxfam KEDV as an interpreter. I play an important front-line facilitation role when we distribute aid and connect with different Turkish communities as well as Syrian refugee communities about their needs.

“I try to help people feel safe. I tell them, ‘You are not alone; we are close to you. I will support you. I will listen to you.’ ... The work is a challenge, but it makes me feel better—it’s like a remedy. When you can provide help to people in the same situation as you, that gives you strength.

“This is the beginning of a new chapter in my life. I thank God that I am strong. I have lots of ambitions. I want to build my third house and plant new flowers. I will create a huge garden for my children.”

**OXFAM’S EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE**

Across Türkiye and Syria, more than 18 million people were affected by the earthquakes. Oxfam is working with partners in both countries to reach nearly 2 million people with emergency aid and support to help them get back on their feet.

The hygiene kits Oxfam KEDV has been helping to distribute, which include a washtub, a jerry can for storing clean drinking water, washing powder, and towels, among other items, have been given to 3,000 households. We have also distributed dignity kits—which include incontinence pads and bed sheets—to 1,800 people, and menstrual hygiene kits have gone to 7,200 women and girls in Hatay and Kahramanmaraş provinces.

In Hatay, more than half of the earthquake-affected population live in informal settlements. In some areas, hundreds of people have to share one toilet and often are without access to bathing facilities.

Oxfam KEDV is in the first year of its three-year response, starting with people’s immediate needs, such as providing access to clean water and rehabilitating damaged water infrastructure.

In mid-April, Oxfam KEDV had reached 24,000 people, including nearly 9,000 in Hatay. In addition to providing clean water and hygiene kits, we have also been providing food—initially by distributing cooked meals and food kits, and then cash vouchers once people can access shops. In this first year of our response, Oxfam KEDV expects to reach 100,000 people.

Once we have addressed critical needs, we will move into a reconstruction phase—including by collaborating with partners in Türkiye to create jobs and income-generating opportunities that will help people rebuild their lives. It may be years before we get to a place where the people of Türkiye have regained security, and Oxfam plans to be there for the duration.