

Algerian earthquake kills 1,500

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Algeria: Man carries injured boy from collapsed building in Boumerdes after earthquake
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More than 1,450 people are estimated to have been killed by the earthquake in Algeria; more than 7,000 have been injured.

The quake which measured 6.8 on the open-ended Richter scale hit at about 7:45 p.m. on May 21st when people were asleep or eating dinner, with rescue efforts beginning in the darkness.

Algeria has experienced many destructive earthquakes but this was the North African nation's worst since a magnitude 7.1 quake hit west of the capital killing about 5,000 people in October 1980, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. This time the worst hit area was in Boumerdes, which is some 50 kilometres (30

miles) east of the capital Algiers. Powerful after shocks continued for sometime after the main tremor and many people spent a second night in parks and other open spaces.

Tectonic causes

The U.S. Geological Survey reported that the earthquake occurred in the boundary region between the Eurasian plate and the African plate. Along this section of the plate boundary, the African plate is moving northwestward against the Eurasian plate with a velocity of about 6 mm per year. The relative plate motions create a compressional tectonic environment, in which earthquakes occur by thrust-faulting and strike-slip faulting. Analysis of seismic waves generated by this earthquake shows that it occurred as the result of thrust-faulting.

Secondary causes

Questions are being asked about building standards particularly after a large apartment building in Boumerdes collapsed (pictured above). Some 350 people are believed to have been buried in this building alone. The quake struck at 03.37 meaning that most people were asleep, limiting their chances of taking survival measures.

A similar question was asked at the beginning of May after a magnitude 6.4 quake hit the area around the town of Bingol in south-east Turkey. A school, home to many boarders not able to travel in daily from remote areas, collapsed. Many other buildings were damaged but did not 'pancake' and so people became concerned. In countries that are not strangers to earthquakes, why are large public buildings not designed to limit the chance of collapse in the same way that many large buildings in earthquake-prone Japan are? Some people blame greedy property developers; others accuse governments for not enforcing building regulations.