



Residents queuing for humanitarian aid in Samandag, Turkey, on Sunday following the recent earthquake. In Singapore, charities including the Singapore Red Cross and World Vision Singapore have raised funds for disaster relief efforts in Turkey and Syria. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Beware scammers soliciting donations for quake victims

Check legitimacy of organisation seeking funds before giving, say S'pore charities

Jessie Lim

Charities in Singapore are aware that scammers overseas have been soliciting donations purportedly on behalf of victims of the Turkey-Syria earthquake, and are reminding donors to stay alert.

On Feb 10, four days after the 7.8-magnitude quake struck, the United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC) warned the public against charity scams.

The consumer protection agency said: "The devastation in Turkey and Syria... is inspiring people to help and donate. And it's prompting scammers - like they do after every disaster - to take advantage of your generosity."

The FTC said these scammers use familiar-sounding names to create fake charities and ask for donations in cash, gift card or cryptocurrency.

Such scams were also circulating on video-sharing platform TikTok, with some accounts posting television recordings depicting rescue efforts while asking for donations, the BBC has reported.

Replying to queries from The Straits Times, the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation (RLAF) said: "These acts are clearly wrong and reprehensible, as they prey on the public's good intentions to help, and exploit the hardships of vulnerable disaster victims."

RLAF has collected more than \$1.1 million since it launched its fund-raising campaign on Feb 10

to support survivors who need tents, blankets and winter clothing.

On Friday, humanitarian organisation World Vision Singapore, which has raised more than \$200,000 to help quake victims, said: "It is very unfortunate and disappointing that there are people who would seek to profit from a humanitarian disaster."

It reminded the public to always check whether an organisation is a registered charity and whether it has a valid fund-raising permit by visiting the Charity Portal (charities.gov.sg).

As at last Tuesday, World Vision had provided 17,000 litres of fuel to medical facilities and search-and-rescue teams in Syria, and ready-to-eat meals to 11,490 people there.

The Singapore Red Cross (SRC) said it is aware that there are

scams that claim to raise funds for disaster response, but to date, it has not seen fake versions of its platform.

"It said: "We constantly remind the public to check for the legitimacy of the fund-raisers they come across before giving."

"It is always safer to give to trusted charities like the Red Cross to ensure that their donations are well maximised and go towards the communities they are intended to support."

SRC has raised more than \$3 million through its fund-raising appeal, with donations from individuals, companies and schools.

In Turkey, the money will be disbursed to the Turkish Red Crescent Society and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The funds will be used to meet the immediate and early recovery needs of victims, including buying and distributing food and water to those who have been displaced by the earthquake. They will also be used to support mental and physical health services for vulnerable groups.

SRC said: "We are in constant contact with our partners in the affected countries on the evolving situation and humanitarian needs so as to achieve the most effective and impactful response to help the communities in need."

It added that it assesses the credentials and proposed activities of those seeking to raise funds on its behalf.

Communication and technology professor Lim Sun Sun from Singapore Management University noted how scammers take advantage of the tremendous outpouring of sympathy for victims of disasters.

"They know that people want to offer some form of solidarity and support and may feel helpless if they are observing the tragedy from afar," she said.

When asked why people will donate to a fund-raiser they see on social media even if they have not heard of the organisation, she said: "If the fund-raiser is shared by a friend, some people may let their guard down and donate even if they do not know the person behind the campaign."

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "When a disaster of such magnitude hits out of the blue, most people do not know what the norms and rules are for responding to the situation."

"They would be more susceptible to disinformation and be easily misled not just by scammers but also by well-meaning people in their social networks."

He added that potential victims may also have seen many others in their social networks donating and felt a sense of urgency to do so too.

A spokesman for Caritas Humanitarian Aid and Relief Initiatives (Singapore), or Charis, said the organisation has not observed any WhatsApp messages or websites spoofing its fund-raising campaign.

Its appeal goes out to the Catholic community and is usually disseminated by church leaders, the spokesman added. As at Friday, Charis has raised more than \$330,000, which it will send to Caritas national organisations on the ground.

How to donate safely

DONATE TO FUND-RAISERS THROUGH GIVING.SG

Giving.sg is the national giving platform backed by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth where donors can find campaigns supporting quake victims in Turkey and Syria, such as those run by Mercy Relief and the Singapore Red Cross.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN

Many humanitarian aid organisations such as World Vision have a registered phone number you can call to find out more about their emergency response efforts.

They may also issue reports updating donors about the assistance they have given and the number of people they have helped.

If an individual is organising a

fund-raiser, find out more about his relationship to the cause he is supporting.

BE CAREFUL OF PHISHING LINKS AND QR CODES

Double-check the websites you are accessing and take note of spelling errors and typos. When scanning a QR code, check the URL to ensure you are not directed to a malicious site.

CHECK THE CHARITY PORTAL

Donors can check whether the charity they are supporting is registered with the Commissioner of Charities at the website: charities.gov.sg

They can also check whether the organisation has a permit to raise funds.

SOURCES: GIVING.SG, RAHMATAN LIL ALAMIN FOUNDATION, WORLD VISION SINGAPORE

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