

Reluctant evacuees

Ill-prepared for acts of Gods

They're dying to stay there. THE capital of Iran hosts about 12m people, is poorly planned, often paralysed by traffic, and notorious for its seismic activity. From the perspective of Iran's militaristic rulers, Tehran's heavy concentration of important politicians, sensitive installations and key ministries makes it vulnerable not only to earthquakes but also to civilian insurrection and aerial attack. The clerics' view is that prostitution and drug abuse have also created a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, inviting divine wrath.

The obvious solution to all the gloom-mongering would be for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to team up with the mayor to make Tehran a nicer place, its citizens more law-abiding and its buildings more earthquake-resistant. But the two men are rivals. And the president is not a great one for obvious solutions.

In the spring he unveiled plans to move some 5m Tehranis to other parts of the country, breaking up government departments and universities (hotbeds of sedition) and dangling loans and bonuses as incentives. The government has now ordered more than 300 public-sector companies and organisations to shift their headquarters from the capital.

The president's scheme has drawn a lukewarm reaction. Whatever the capital's drawbacks, few Tehranis approve of a plan that would send them back to the same provincial backwaters that they or their parents left. Out in the sticks, they expect a dearth of housing and amenities. On May 31st a government spokesman disclosed that 4,000 civil servants had signed up to leave the capital: a mere 196,000 short of the government's target.

And not all the president's ideas seem mutually compatible. Members of parliament question the logic of half-emptying Tehran while simultaneously introducing incentives aimed at doubling the national population; Mr Ahmadinejad regards the fashion of having no more than two children as "Western". The city council, naturally, opposes any plan that would diminish Tehran's prestige. "Emotionalism will not solve the problem," sniffs one councillor.

On one thing, everyone agrees: the consequences of a big earthquake would be appalling. Tehran sits where two tectonic plates clash and is criss-crossed by fault lines. Few buildings would survive the "big one" that almost everyone fears. In the words of one prayer leader, "Take to the streets and repent of your sins. A holy scourge is upon us. Leave town."

Fonte: The Economist, June 10th 2010. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>.

Acesso em: 17 jun. 2010.