



Armenian National Committee of America

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

February 2, 2007

The Honorable Richard Durbin
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Durbin:

Please accept our appreciation for the opportunity you have offered our organization to submit testimony (see attached) for the February 5, 2007 hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law on "Genocide and the Rule of Law."

Armenian Americans, in Illinois and around the nation, have tremendous respect for your principled leadership in genocide prevention and, of course, deeply appreciate your efforts toward U.S. recognition of the Armenian Genocide. We are encouraged by the creation of the Human Rights and Law Subcommittee and look forward to supporting the vital work of this panel in the months and years ahead.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to contribute to your important efforts to maintain and strengthen America's leadership in protecting human rights.

Sincerely,



Aram Hamparian
Executive Director

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**Statement of Aram Suren Hamparian
Executive Director of the Armenian National Committee of America**

**Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law
Hearing on “Genocide and the Rule of Law”
February 5, 2007**

Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Coburn, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Armenian National Committee of America, I would like to thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting our organization to offer the insights of the Armenian American community on a truly crucial issue for our nation and the entire international community.

The cycle of genocide

Today, as we witness the genocide unfolding in Darfur, it has become increasingly clear that the failure of the international community, over the course of the past century, to confront and punish genocide has created an environment of impunity in which the brutal cycle of genocide continues.

As Armenian Americans - heirs of a nation that bore witness to the 20th Century's first genocide - we bear a special responsibility to help ensure that the lessons of our experience help prevent similar atrocities from being visited upon any people, anywhere in the world.

We consider it our responsibility to contribute to the life-saving work of the Save Darfur Coalition, Africa Action, the Genocide Intervention Network, and other groups working to bring an end to the horrific suffering in Sudan. Here in the United States, we enthusiastically support the efforts of Facing History and Ourselves, the Genocide Education Project and other educational groups teaching America's school children about the dangers of genocide and the value of tolerance. We are especially encouraged by the powerful reach of the band "System of a Down" - comprised of four Armenian Americans - in educating countless millions about genocides - past and present. The powerful documentary "Screamers," which is currently playing around the nation, documents their work in this area. All these efforts are aimed at breaking the genocidal cycle.

With specific regard to the situation in Darfur, we were gratified that the Administration - in a break from past practice - properly invoked the term genocide, but remain deeply troubled that our government has yet to take the decisive steps required of us under our commitments to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. We run the risk of turning this landmark treaty into a dead letter if our actions do not live up to our moral and legal obligations.

As members of this panel know, the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust weighed heavily on the mind of international lawyer Raphael Lemkin, whose family was brutally murdered by the Nazis in their genocidal drive to destroy the Jews of Europe. He coined the term “genocide” and was instrumental in the drafting and adoption of the Convention. In a 1949 interview with CBS, Lemkin explained, “I became interested in genocide because it happened to the Armenians; and after[wards] the Armenians got a very rough deal at the Versailles Conference because their criminals were guilty of genocide and were not punished.”

The denial of the Armenian Genocide

Sadly, even in 2007, we are faced with a state-sponsored campaign of denial that the Armenian Genocide ever took place.

This denial takes the form of Turkish laws against even the mention of the Armenian Genocide, the systematic teaching of genocide denial to Turkey’s school children, and, in nations around the world, a campaign of threats, intimidation and blackmail against any individual, group, or country that speaks the truth about the Ottoman Turkish government’s murder of 1.5 million Armenians between 1915 and 1923.

Our own Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during the early years of the Genocide, Henry Morgenthau, described the government’s crimes as “a campaign of race extermination.” The Allied Powers vowed to punish the Turkish authorities for these crimes, using for the first time the term “crimes against humanity,” but, as we know too well, they did not fulfill their promise of justice for the Armenian people, setting the stage for nearly a century of Turkish government denials.

We work to end this denial because, as a matter of fundamental morality, our nation should recognize and condemn all genocides - past and present. The United States should, on principle, reject all genocide denial - whether it come from Tehran, Khartoum or Ankara. To do any less is to undermine our country’s credibility on the most vital international issue of our time - the creation of a world safe from genocide.

We work to end this denial because it seeks to obscure a proud chapter in American history. Those who deny this crime dishonor President Woodrow Wilson and all those who spoke out against the atrocities committed against the Armenian people. They dishonor the U.S. diplomats who risked their lives to document the suffering of the Armenian nation. They dishonor the Americans - rich and poor - who gave of themselves as part of an unprecedented American relief effort to alleviate the suffering of a brutalized population.

We work to end this denial because we know that the Republic of Armenia cannot be safe as long as Turkey remains an unrepentant perpetrator of genocide against the Armenian people.

We work to end this denial because Turkey’s acceptance of a just resolution of the Armenian Genocide would represent significant progress toward a more tolerant Turkish society, and a

meaningful step toward the Republic of Turkey's long sought acceptance into the European family of nations.

And, perhaps most importantly for the work of this panel today, we work to end this denial because it sets a dangerous precedent - a real life example of genocide committed with impunity - that makes future genocides more likely. Prior to launching his "final solution," Adolf Hitler infamously cited this example in a 1939 speech intended to quiet the potential reservations of his generals, asking the chilling question: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

The denial of any genocide, past or present, sets a dangerous precedent for the future, emboldening potential perpetrators with the knowledge that their crimes can be committed without condemnation or consequence.

The murder of Hrant Dink

The most recent victim of this denial is Hrant Dink, a courageous journalist who was assassinated on January 19th of this year in front of his newspaper's offices in Istanbul.

One of the remaining Armenians living in Turkey, Hrant was born and spent his early years in Malatya, a city whose Armenian population was - with only a handful of exceptions - destroyed during the Armenian Genocide. As editor of Agos, a bilingual Armenian-Turkish language newspaper, he faced years of official persecution and regular death threats in response to his writings about the Armenian Genocide. Last year he was given a suspended sentence of six months under Article 301, a new provision of the Turkish Penal Code that punishes discussion of the Armenian Genocide as an "insult to Turkishness." When he criticized this verdict, he was prosecuted once again under a different provision of law that criminalizes attempts to "influence the judiciary." In his last column, he wrote about the torment of living in the shadow of death threats and the vulnerability he faced due to the government's incitement of hatred against him.

Hrant Dink was not alone. Many other writers in Turkey are being silenced through Turkey's criminal code. Nobel Prize-winner Orhan Pamuk has been prosecuted under Article 301 for mentioning the killings of Armenians. The writer Elif Shafak was prosecuted for writing a novel in which her fictional characters discussed the Armenian Genocide.

Hrant Dink's murder is tragic proof that the Turkish government continues to fuel the same type of hatred and intolerance that led to the Armenian Genocide more than ninety years ago. His killing was not an isolated act, as Turkish leaders have said in what can only be described as disingenuous expressions of regret, but rather occurred as the result of the Turkish government's official - and increasingly aggressive - policy of denial. His example underscores the pressing need for the United States to fully recognize the Armenian Genocide - through Executive branch action and the adoption by the Congress of the Armenian Genocide Resolution.

U.S. complicity in Armenian Genocide denial

Sadly, the Turkish government is able to maintain its denial, against all evidence and the tide of international opinion, in large part due to the State Department's refusal to speak with moral clarity about the Armenian Genocide.

Our State Department remained almost entirely unwilling to speak publicly against the Turkish government's longstanding prosecution and persecution of Hrant Dink. In fact, a search of the Department's website finds only one mention of him before his murder. In sharp contrast, the same State Department that has been so reluctant to defend free speech within Turkey has been more than willing to loudly and aggressively seek to prevent our own legislature - the U.S. Congress - from even considering legislation commemorating Armenian Genocide.

In a truly unfortunate escalation of our complicity in Turkey's denials, the State Department, last year, fired Ambassador John Evans - a distinguished diplomat with over thirty years of experience - for properly characterizing the Armenian Genocide. In the proud tradition of Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, who represented our nation in the Ottoman Empire during the early years of the Genocide, Ambassador Evans spoke the truth about this crime against humanity. For this, his career of service to our nation was ended by an Administration apparently more concerned with the sensitivities of a foreign government - one that regularly violates the free speech rights of its own citizens - than with the rights of an American citizen who speaks out honestly about genocide. The Turkish government's Foreign Agent Registration Filings with the Justice Department reveal that its foreign agents contacted several U.S. officials regarding the Ambassador's comments, but, as of today, the State Department has been unwilling to offer any meaningful explanation of the role the Turkish government played in the Ambassador's dismissal.

Most recently, the President - in the face of broad-based Congressional opposition - has again nominated Richard Hoagland to serve as ambassador to Armenia, despite his intensely controversial record of denying the Genocide. As a community, Armenian Americans are deeply grateful for the principled leadership of Senator Robert Menendez, who has, once again, placed a hold on this ill-advised nomination.

In closing, I would like to stress that, although the Armenian Genocide began in 1915, it continues today through the Turkish government's worldwide campaign of denial. We look to the members of this panel, and to all Members of Congress, to help end U.S. complicity in Turkey's denial, and to encourage the Republic of Turkey to abandon its efforts to erase this chapter in its - and the world's - history.

The proper recognition and universal commemoration of the Armenian Genocide will, we are confident, represent a meaningful contribution to our nation's efforts to end the cycle of genocide.
