

Armenian National Committee of America

*"The Armenian American Community and
U.S. Foreign Assistance Policy"*

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Armenian National Committee of America

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today to offer testimony on behalf of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), the nation's oldest and largest Armenian American grassroots political organization.

Before I proceed with our testimony, I would like to point out that this year's hearing coincides with the commemoration of the 81st anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, a solemn time of remembrance for the Armenian people all over the world and, of course, in the United States. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the members of Congress who have joined with our community in remembering this crime against humanity by making statements on the House and Senate floors, by cosponsoring House Concurrent Resolution 47, and by calling upon Turkey to end its shameful campaign to deny this tragic chapter in Armenian and Turkish history.

Mr. Chairman, as the members of this Subcommittee are aware, Armenian Americans are among the most ardent advocates of American leadership internationally. On their behalf, I would like to express our appreciation for your principled leadership of this important Subcommittee and your ongoing efforts to enact legislation which advances our values and interests in the world today. I hereby reaffirm the Armenian American community's support for a policy of active international engagement by the United States and outline our views on a variety of specific issues dealing with U.S. foreign assistance programs.

Support for U.S. Foreign Assistance Programs

As the Subcommittee is currently addressing the issues dealing with the shape of the International Affairs function in the federal budget, I would like to emphasize that we consider foreign assistance spending a strategic investment which favorably impacts the United States national interest on a number of different levels. Wisely targeted assistance programs to the emerging nations, in particular, advance the U.S. national interest, not only by promoting democracy, building peace, and meeting humanitarian needs, but also by laying the groundwork for long-term commercial relations. The investment we make today in these newly independent states will lead to increased market share in the future for U.S. exports and expanded trade opportunities for U.S. businesses.

Mr. Chairman, foreign assistance remains an essential element of U.S. leadership in an increasingly complex world. Foreign assistance programs can help prevent or resolve international conflicts before they reach unmanageable proportions. Foreign assistance can be an effective catalyst for the spread of democracy and respect for human rights. It can also help the economies of the developing world jump start and, in the process, become valuable trading partners for the United States. In this regard, the 1% of federal spending dedicated to the immediate jurisdiction of this Subcommittee is a small but vital portion of the U.S. budget.

For these reasons, the ANCA considers it imperative that the integrity of the International Affairs (150) account of the fiscal year 1997 budget is carefully safeguarded, making sure that it has the critical mass to fulfill its mission. We are firmly opposed to any further cuts in this

account and are working, along with other concerned organizations, to encourage Congress to appropriate sufficient levels of funding to meet the challenges of the post Cold War era. We place special value on foreign assistance programs to the newly independent states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. At the same time, we support the application of a consistent set of conditions on foreign assistance recipients regarding their commitment to democratic principles, economic reform and, above all, respect for human rights.

U.S. Assistance to Armenia

The ANCA and the entire Armenian American community are deeply appreciative of the assistance appropriated by Congress to meet humanitarian needs and promote economic and democratic reform in Armenia. This assistance has strengthened Armenia's confidence in its development effort, enhanced stability throughout the region, and served as an important symbol of American leadership in the promotion of prosperity in the region.

As Armenia's economy improves, the Armenian people will develop self-sufficiency and will, in time, no longer look to the United States, or any other nation, for high levels of economic assistance. This improvement, however, is closely linked to how soon the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades of Armenia are lifted. These blockades have caused severe shortages of basic necessities throughout Armenia, inhibited economic development, and caused over 800,000 Armenians to leave their homeland out of desperation. Continued United States assistance to Armenia is needed, in great measure, to offset the devastating effects of the blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Over the long-term, neither the Armenian American community, nor the people of Armenia, seek dependence on economic assistance from the United States. However, during these critical transition years, assistance from the United States to Armenia will play a pivotal role in enabling the Armenian economy to unleash its potential.

Accordingly, the ANCA supports a hard-earmark of at least \$150 million for Armenia for fiscal year 1997 to help offset the devastating effects of the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades and to help the Armenian people overcome the legacy of the centrally managed economy and authoritarian political structure which characterized the Soviet era. These funds will be used to meet the country's current humanitarian needs, develop the economy, and promote the building of democratic institutions.

Mr. Chairman, the ANCA considers it important that the assistance package for Armenia is targeted toward the nation's current priorities and takes advantage of the growing community of non-governmental organizations in Armenia. Among Armenia's leading development priorities are the following:

- 1) The development of the energy sector;
- 2) The expansion of public health programs, with a special emphasis on the plight of the elderly, children, the disabled, and working mothers;

- 3) Institution building with specific attention to the modernization of banking and the development of the nation's economic infrastructure;
- 4) Training and exchange programs which promote democracy and human rights;
- 5) The development of small business enterprises, focusing on the modernization of local economies located outside the nation's capital, and;
- 6) Support for education, with emphasis on the modernization of facilities and support for teachers.

Mr. Chairman, on the subject of democratic reforms in Armenia, it is important to note that, unlike many of the emerging nations of the former Soviet Union, the Armenian people have a strong democratic tradition which dates back to the earlier periods of the nation's history. In more contemporary times, the first Armenian Republic of 1918, under the leadership of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, was a model of democracy which was supported by the United States under President Woodrow Wilson. The Armenian people are fundamentally committed to democracy and have an abiding respect for human rights.

We must realize, at the same time, that the newly independent Republic of Armenia still bears the burdens of its Soviet past. The Armenian people have made valiant and impressive efforts to move the Republic toward democracy. The United States must continue to stand with them as they seek to overcome the often difficult challenges they will face on the road to democracy. In this regard, we welcome the increased attention that the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development has placed on democratic development in Armenia. This assistance has served as a strong signal to the people of Armenia that the United States will be a reliable ally in their noble struggle for many years to come.

The Armenian American community, dating back to the tragic earthquake of 1988, has reached out, through private contributions, to fund reconstruction projects, resettle refugees, and address other pressing relief needs of the Armenian people. These contributions, and the work of such non-governmental groups as the Armenian Relief Society, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Armenian Assembly, and the Armenian Church, will continue. The role played by United States assistance to Armenia, however, goes beyond the scope of private contributions and fulfills a long-range strategic purpose for U.S. interests in the region.

Mr. Chairman, it is impossible to comment on the development needs of Armenia and the strategic interests of the United States without addressing the Nagorno Karabagh issue. For seventy years, during Soviet rule, the people of Nagorno Karabagh suffered under a repressive Soviet regime and the persecution of the Azerbaijani government. The people of Nagorno Karabagh sought, through legal and constitutional means to assert their right to self-determination. Their peaceful efforts were answered by Azerbaijani aggression and a military campaign aimed at depopulating Nagorno Karabagh of its Armenian population. For the last eight years, the people of Nagorno Karabagh struggled, first for their own survival and then to assert their right to self-determination. Having proven their resolve by successfully defending

their homes and families against outside threats, the people of Nagorno Karabagh exercised their rights under international law and declared Nagorno Karabagh an independent republic.

Today, the Republic of Nagorno Karabagh is an active participant in negotiations organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It is a key contributor to peace in the region. We believe that it is the responsibility of the United States and the international community to support the people of Nagorno Karabagh during this difficult time. Karabagh is effectively blockaded by a hostile Azerbaijan, with the strong backing of Turkey. In these circumstances, the people of Nagorno Karabagh must rebuild the economy of their republic. It is, therefore, imperative that the United States should seek to participate in this important reconstruction effort without waiting for the final outcome of the OSCE negotiations.

In our opinion, assistance to Nagorno Karabagh should begin immediately, as a confidence building measure, and should continue, without interruption, until the destruction caused by the war has been rehabilitated. We believe that targeted reconstruction support to Nagorno Karabagh will prove, over time, to be an investment in peace in a region of great significance to the United States. The ANCA would like to work with the Subcommittee to offer specific recommendations about how such an assistance package could be delivered to the people of Nagorno Karabagh.

The Restriction on U.S. Assistance to Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh, coupled with Turkey's obstruction of humanitarian assistance to Armenia, has led to a chronic lack of heating fuel, a scarcity of electricity, and severe shortages of food, fuel, medicine and other desperately needed supplies. The Congress, in October of 1992, responded to this unacceptable situation by restricting U.S. assistance to the Azerbaijani government until it had ended its aggression and lifted its blockades against Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh. To date, successive Azerbaijani governments have steadfastly refused to either lift their blockade or abandon a military solution to the conflict over Nagorno Karabagh.

This statute, Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, was weakened last year with the passage of language in the Fiscal Year 1996 foreign assistance bill which created a new waiver authority that the President can exercise to allow direct assistance to the government of Azerbaijan under certain circumstances. This language, commonly known as the Wilson amendment, was included by the conference committee, despite the absence of any language on this subject in either the House or Senate versions of the bill.

The ANCA has called upon the President not to exercise the Wilson amendment waiver, and, to date, there has not been any indication that the Administration plans to take advantage of the waiver authority in the near future. The ANCA encourages the Subcommittee to carefully monitor the Administration's conduct on this issue. Despite the inclusion of the Wilson amendment in the Fiscal Year 1996 bill, it should be clear that the reasons for the ban on U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan continues to exist as compellingly as ever and therefore the ban itself continues to have strong bipartisan support in both houses of Congress.

The ANCA strongly supports the law restricting U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan and actively opposes any effort to weaken, waive, or eliminate this prohibition. Any effort to circumvent the intent of this provision of law, particularly during the ongoing negotiations, would likely be viewed by the Azerbaijani government as a signal for renewed aggression.

It should be noted that the United States has provided tens of millions of dollars in humanitarian assistance directly to non-governmental organizations in Azerbaijan. This type of assistance is not prohibited by section 907 and, therefore, is not at issue.

U.S. Assistance to Turkey

The Armenian American community has long held reservations regarding the high levels of U.S. foreign assistance to Turkey. These reservations are based on the devastating impact of Turkey's blockade of humanitarian assistance to Armenia, the threat to regional stability posed by Turkey's ongoing military build-up, and the destabilizing effect of Turkey's support for Azerbaijani aggression against Nagorno Karabagh. Furthermore, the Armenian American community strongly objects to Turkey's policy of denying the genocide against the Armenians perpetrated by Turkey in the period from 1915 to 1923.

In addition, the Armenian American community is troubled by Turkey's long history of human rights abuses at home and aggression abroad. This pattern includes the systematic and widespread use of torture and human rights abuses against its own citizens, the genocidal policies being pursued against the Kurdish community, the unfair restrictions on the rights of Christian communities, recent provocations against Greece in the Aegean Sea, and, of course, the continuing occupation of Cyprus.

For many decades, the United States essentially turned a blind eye to Turkey's consistent failure to meet even minimum standards for human rights and humanitarian practices. Recently, however, there has been notable progress in the linkage of U.S. assistance levels to Turkey's unacceptable behavior.

In this regard, the ANCA viewed the Fiscal Year 1996 foreign assistance bill as a positive turning-point in U.S. foreign assistance policy toward Turkey. This legislation contained language from the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act, which prohibits all U.S. assistance to Turkey if it maintains its illegal blockade of U.S. humanitarian assistance to Armenia. This legislation, which has yet to be enforced, represents sound policy and a reasoned step toward restoring credibility to our foreign assistance programs. We call upon the Congress to ensure that the Corridor Act is strictly enforced and that the terms of this legislation are applied immediately to Turkey.

In addition, the full House passed the Porter Amendment to the Fiscal Year 1996 bill which ultimately cut 25% of economic assistance to Turkey based on a range of human rights and humanitarian concerns. The 247 to 155 vote in support of the Porter Amendment sent a clear signal to Turkey that the United States will not tolerate, much less subsidize, the Turkish government's unacceptable conduct. This shift in thinking was, we believe, reflected in the sharp cuts in the level of economic and military assistance to Turkey proposed by the Administration

for Fiscal Year 1997. While we welcome these reductions, we will continue to work to strengthen the linkages between Turkey's conduct and the level of assistance it receives.

Finally, we note that even as assistance levels to Turkey are decreasing, based on the concerns outlined above, we are witnessing an increase in advanced weaponry sales and transfers to Turkey. Accordingly, we call upon the Subcommittee to exercise its oversight authority by carefully scrutinizing U.S. military sales and transfers to Turkey. Special attention must be given to any U.S. military hardware which may be used by the Turkish armed forces in Cyprus, against Kurdish civilians or which may be transferred to Azerbaijan for use against Nagorno Karabagh.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and to reaffirm the support of the Armenian American community for our nation's foreign assistance program.
