

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 offer testimony today before the International Relations Committee on behalf of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), the nation's oldest and largest Armenian American grassroots political organization.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to begin today by noting that the Armenian Americans are among the most ardent advocates of American leadership abroad. On their behalf, I would like to express our appreciation for your principled leadership of the International Relations Committee and thank you for your ongoing efforts to enact legislation which advances our values and interests in the world today.

### **Support for U.S. Foreign Assistance Programs**

The ANCA is committed to the belief that foreign assistance spending represents a strategic investment which favorably impacts the United States national interest on a number of different levels. Wisely targeted assistance programs to 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. Clearly, the 1% of federal spending dedicated to this purpose 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 1998 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, such as the Campaign to Preserve U.S. Global Leadership, to encourage Congress to appropriate sufficient levels of funding to meet the challenges of the present era. We place special value on foreign assistance programs to the emerging economies 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 and Nagorno Karabagh**

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 economic assistance. We, once again, contend that this improvement 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. It is important to note that these people have left their homes due to politically-imposed poverty, the direct result of the blockades mentioned above. 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 other nations. However, during these critical years, assistance from the United States to Armenia is vital and will play a pivotal role in enabling the Armenian economy to unleash its potential, despite the artificial handicaps it has had to face.

Accordingly, the ANCA supports a hard-earmark of at least \$150 million for Armenia for fiscal year 1998 to help offset the devastating effects of the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades and to help the Armenian transition by generating growth from within. These funds will be used to meet the country's current humanitarian needs, develop the economy and infrastructure, and promote the building of democratic institutions. An economically viable Armenia will be a catalyst for economic development throughout the region and, in fact, throughout the former Soviet Union.

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:

- \* The modernization and development of the energy sector;
- \* The expansion of public health programs, with a special emphasis on the plight of the elderly, children, the disabled, and working mothers;
- \* The accelerated redevelopment of the earthquake stricken zone, which remains in dire need of housing and other construction;
- \* Democratic reforms and institution building, including training and exchange programs, leading to a significantly larger participation by the people in Armenia's governmental process;
- \* The development of a healthy agricultural sector;
- \* The development of small and viable business enterprises, focusing on the growth of local economies located outside the nation's capital;
- \* 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. Even under the

oppressive rule of the Ottoman Turks, the Armenians opted to govern their community life with a model constitution based on the highest principles of representative government. 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 strongly supported by the United States under President Woodrow Wilson. The Armenian people will always be on the forefront of democracy and 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 Congress and the Administration have 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 Missionary Association of America, the Armenian Technology Group, Armenian Medical Outreach, the Armenian Assembly, as well as 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 longer-range strategic purpose impacting 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 Soviet 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 nine 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 entirely blockaded by a hostile Azerbaijan, with the strong backing of Turkey. In these circumstances, the people of Nagorno Karabagh are faced with the difficult task of rebuilding 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.

Mr. Chairman, peace in the region cannot come by force and intimidation. The Lisbon Summit of the OSCE provided ample evidence that the Karabagh issue requires patient and constructive

diplomacy by the international community. Humanitarian assistance provided directly to Nagorno Karabagh would build a healthier environment for the OSCE negotiations. Lack of such assistance would indirectly reward those nations that have imposed the blockades which the U.S. has openly condemned.

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. The House adopted language in its version of the FY 1997 foreign assistance appropriation which would have provided direct assistance to Nagorno Karabagh. Unfortunately, the Senate did not support this provision. As such, the language in question was not maintained by the Conference Committee in the final version of the bill signed by the President.

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 International Relations Committee to offer specific approaches and 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.

This statute, Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, was weakened two years ago 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 exercise its waiver authority in the near future. The ANCA encourages the International Relations Committee to carefully monitor the Administration's future conduct on this issue. 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 clear signal for renewed aggression.

It should be noted that the United States has provided over \$100 million in humanitarian assistance directly to non-governmental organizations in Azerbaijan. The Administration has proposed an additional \$31.5 million for fiscal year 1998. This type of assistance is not prohibited by section 907 and, therefore, is not at issue. In addition, according to senior officials in the oil industry, private U.S. corporations have sent an additional \$100 million in relief assistance to Azerbaijan.

### **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, 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 January of 1996, the Congress adopted 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. The President, in May of 1996, exercised his national security waiver of this law as it relates to Turkey, effectively rejecting the bipartisan will of Congress that U.S. aid to Turkey should be linked to its lifting of the blockade of Armenia. This legislation represents sound policy and a reasoned step toward restoring credibility to our foreign assistance programs. It should be immediately and strictly enforced. Given the Administration's record, however, we call upon Congress to enact legislation to restrict the President's waiver authority.

Last year, the full House passed the Radanovich/Bonior Amendment to the fiscal year 1997 foreign aid bill which cut \$3 million in economic assistance to Turkey because of Turkey's continued denial of the Armenian Genocide. Turkey's shameful denial, which was thoroughly documented for this Committee during a hearing on May 15th of last year, remains a continued source of tension between Armenia and Turkey. By coming to terms with this chapter in its history, Turkey would help diminish tensions in an unstable region and open the door to normalized relations with Armenia.

Unfortunately, rather than honestly addressing the Armenian Genocide, the Turkish government reacted angrily to the principled stand taken by Congress in adopting the Radanovich/Bonior Amendment. On the evening of the vote, the Turkish Embassy convened a hastily-called press conference to announce that Turkey rejected any and all U.S. economic assistance. Earlier this

year, Congressman Radanovich took the logical step of introducing legislation to assign the funds rejected by Turkey, roughly \$22 million, to meet pressing agricultural development needs in Armenia. The ANCA supports this legislation and is working to secure its adoption.

It is also instructive to note that two year ago, the House passed the Porter Amendment which 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 1998. 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.

On a final note, I would like to point out to the Committee 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.

These escalating transfers and sales, as well as the increasing "cascade" of NATO weapons to Turkey, threaten to accelerate the regional arms race, seriously impacting U.S. interests in the region. It should be clear by now that the U.S. should not place more arms in the hands of a nation which is actively involved in aggression against its own citizens and which has openly threatened its neighbors. As you know, the use of U.S. supplied weapons by the Turkish military in human rights abuses against civilians has been documented by both the State and Defense departments.

On a number of occasions over the past year, the Congress raised serious reservations regarding the sale or transfer of weaponry to Turkey. On two occasions, namely the sale of SuperCobra helicopter and the transfer of naval frigates, the Administration responded to these concerns by placing the transactions in question on hold. In a third instance, the Administration ignored bipartisan Congressional opposition and approved the controversial sale to Turkey of ATACM missiles. As you know, earlier this year, more than 80 members of Congress, including yourself and several other member of the Committee, called upon the Administration to cancel the proposed sale of Seahawk helicopters to Turkey. This matter is still pending.

We call upon the International Relations Committee to continue to exercise its oversight authority by carefully scrutinizing U.S. military sales and transfers to Turkey. We recommend that special attention 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.