

Mr. Chairman and the US Helsinki Commission members,

I am Fr. Vertanes Kalayjian, Pastor of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, Washington, DC. I am here representing the Armenian Apostolic Church Eastern Diocese headquartered in New York City.

I thank you for the opportunity to address this briefing and to voice our concerns relating to the status of the Armenian Church and the Armenian community in Turkey.

Allow me, first, to speak about myself to provide a backdrop for the statements I am about to make in these briefings.

I was born in Aleppo, Syria and was raised in the northern town of Azaz only 10 km from the Turkish boarder. As a teenager, there were many occasions when with my friends we would take a hike or take a bike ride to the boarder. Another 10 km beyond the Turkish boarder is the town of Kilis, the birthplace of my parents, a place which I could never visit.

That was over 50 years ago. Circumstances have changed, of course, as they do with the passing time. Now as a US citizen I can go and visit the ancestral lands of my parents. I did so in the year 2001 on the occasion of the 1700th anniversary of Armenia's official declaration of Christianity as the faith of the nation. The official reception we received in Turkey was beyond our expectation. Swept by the prevailing cordial reception, I suggested to the Mayor of Kars, a northeastern city near the border with Armenia, to plant a tree to commemorate the occasion. Before our departure to Armenia, our final destination of our pilgrimage, we did plant a tree in one of the newest parks created by the Mayor himself.

Mr. Chairman, even though the circumstances have changed to some degree, there are some thick clouds overshadowing the relations between our two nations—the Turks and the Armenians.

In June of 2004 a few of our community leaders and I responded to an invitation extended by the Ambassador from the Turkish Foreign Ministry Mr. Ecvet Tezcan for a “first hand exchange of views”. Mr. Tezcan went on to say in a follow-up letter: “I hope this exchange of views will bring positive results in the future, paving the way for a better understanding between our societies and for peace and prosperity in our region. ... I have every reason to be optimistic.”

Mr. Chairman, I regret to say that at this point we have no reason yet to share that optimism. I want to make clear that my lack of optimism has nothing to do with almost insurmountable issue of the Armenian Genocide by Turks, which on this 90th anniversary year we are commemorating in this month worldwide. It has however everything to do with steps and measures that the Turkish government can and must take unilaterally to make life for the Armenian Church and the Armenian community in Turkey bearable. To lift de facto second-class citizenship, bureaucratic obstructionism and discrimination perpetrated upon the Armenian and other Christian minorities, here are the points I presented to the Ambassador.

- a. Safeguarding the ethnic, cultural and religious rights of the Armenian citizens of Turkey; it is telling that such minorities which have been part of the landscape for

- centuries, are referred to, by the Turkish government, as “**indigenous foreigners**”;
- b. Safeguarding and uninhibited functioning of the remaining Armenian church structures and communities under the administrative, legal and spiritual authority of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul;
 - c. Recognizing the legal personality for the Armenian Patriarchate;
 - d. Safeguarding the integrity, the independence and even encouraging the positive contributions of the Armenian schools and institutions (the press, hospitals, cultural and alumni associations);
 - e. Granting permission or, more correctly stated, restoring the right of the Armenian Patriarchate to have and maintain a religious seminary to produce the next generation of Armenian clergy to care for the religious-spiritual needs of the Armenian population of Turkey.

It does not make sense at all to impose a requirement that the next Patriarch be elected from among the clergy who are Turkish citizens when the operation of a seminary to produce such candidates is hampered.

Emanating from the points mentioned are also situations such as:

- Forcing a government appointed vice-principle or some such official upon the Armenian schools. The result is lack of freedom of action, intimidation and an untenable suspicious environment, let alone fear.
- Routinely, the churches and institutions are denied physical repairs and renovations. Yes, one may apply for such permits, but you have to apply for it in Ankara, the capital, and the response, if any, may come detrimentally late.
- Because of demographic changes and shifts, the status of the churches that remain with little or no parishioners, are not subject to the Patriarchate’s administrative discretion. The result has been confiscation of church properties because the government has decreed that they are not transferable to the Patriarchate.
- The Patriarchate, in the absence of legal identity, cannot address the issues of other churches and properties that are abandoned since 1915 massacres and mass deportations.
- For the same reasons, one cannot bequeath property to the Patriarchate.
- Restrictions were placed on how to identify a citizen in the identity card (Nufus papers). They removed the previous practice of mentioning an individual’s religion (Christian) and ethnic identity (Armenian) and then by government decree one could not enroll into the Armenian school unless you prove you are an Armenian.

These items, Mr. Chairman, cover some of the basic human, as well as civil rights of the Armenian population of Turkey and the debilitating restrictions imposed upon the Patriarchate and the churches under its jurisdiction.

We hope and pray that sober minded officials in the Turkish government will find their way to correct them for the benefit of all.

Respectfully submitted,

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