

## **A REASON FOR THE OUTRAGE**

By Arda Jebejian

*Lecturer of Applied Linguistics, University of Nicosia*

Recently, the President of Armenia, Serge Sarkissian, visited Lebanon to meet with the Armenian community. On this particular visit, though, instead of the usual open arms and bouquets of flowers, the President was welcomed with more than 20,000 demonstrators who held up banners with the word "Traitor" on them. The President had come to rally support for the two protocols establishing diplomatic and bilateral relations with Turkey (which Armenia was going to sign on October 10, 2009, in Switzerland).

The peace deal would open the border Turkey shut in 1993, to show solidarity to Azerbaijan over the war in Nagorno-Karapagh. The protocols make no mention of the disputed territory of Karapagh or the massacre of more than a million and a half ethnic Armenians in 1915, which Turkey denies strongly. The protocols call for the creation of a committee of international experts to research the events of 1915, thus casting doubts on the historical record of the Armenian Genocide.

On this occasion, William Schabas, President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, addressed an open letter to President Sarkissian and Prime Minister Erdogan saying: "As the leading scholarly organization engaged in the study of genocide, we welcome continued investigation that will enhance our understanding of the 1915 massacres. However, we are extremely wary of any call for allegedly impartial research into what are clearly established historical facts. Acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide must be the starting point of any "impartial historical commission," not one of its possible conclusions. The world would not accept an inquiry into the truth of the Nazi Holocaust, or the extermination of the Tutsi in Rwanda, and nor can it do so with the genocide of the Armenians."

The protocols were signed on the set date but after three and a half hours' delay. The Parliaments of both countries still must ratify the agreement.

The majority of the Armenians in the homeland and the diaspora oppose the protocols and feel they are being forced into accepting terms that threaten Armenia's and Armenians' interests, rights, safety, and future. Hence, Serge Sarkissian embarked on an international tour early in October, visiting major Armenian communities in Russia, the US, France, and the Middle East to answer questions concerning the protocols. Everywhere he went the President was greeted with overt, unprecedented outrage.

The reason for the President's extensive tour around the world to meet Armenians is partly because only 2.5 million Armenians live in Armenia, while 7 million in the diaspora, scattered in 88 different countries in the world. A big part of the answer for this worldwide scatter lies in the widespread massacres of 1894-1896 of Armenians by the Ottomans that were followed by the Cilician pogroms of 1909 and ultimately by the Armenian Genocide in 1915.

For researchers the events of 1915 bear some comparison with the tit-for-tat expulsion between Nigerians and Ghanaians, and the "ethnic cleansing" of "inconvenient" groups in the micro-states that emerged following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In a single year, the Armenians were robbed of their 3,000-year-old heritage. The desecration of churches, the burning of libraries, the ruination of towns and villages – all erased an ancient civilization. The Armenians saved only that which formed part of their collective memory: their language, their songs, and their culture. The abuse of their memory by the continuing denial of Turkish governments of the slaughter of Armenians is probably the most agonizing of their tribulations.

As Richard Falk has put it, the Turkish campaign of denying the Armenian Genocide is "sinister," singular in the annals of history, and "a major, proactive, deliberate government effort to use every possible instrument of persuasion at its disposal to keep the truth about the Armenian Genocide from general

acknowledgement, especially by the elites in the United States and Western Europe". Elie Wiesel has called denying genocide, and in particular the Armenian Genocide, a "double killing," because it murders the memory of the event.

The Armenians remember the Genocide every year on April 24. On that day in 1915 the Turkish government rounded up all the Armenian intellectuals in Istanbul. They were all subsequently murdered. The Genocide is commemorated by requiems in all Armenian churches as well as public gatherings, marches, speeches, concerts, and plays. The Genocide and its subsequent denial by Turkish governments is a symbol of collective Armenian identity. By selecting such a symbolic framework, Armenians have been provided with a sense of peoplehood, cultural rebirth, and historical continuity.

Hence, a reason for the outrage.