

# 1915 EVENTS WERE A FIGHT BETWEEN FRIENDS

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# TODAY'S ZAMAN

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Berdos Şirinoğlu, a representative of the Armenian community and president of the board of trustees of the Armenian Surp Pirgiç Hospital, told reporters after talks with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that no good could come out of bringing up what happened a century ago and that there were losses on both sides as Turks and Armenians -- antagonized by third parties -- fought against each other.

"This was 100 years ago. There is no point in digging further into the past. I cannot understand why some people try to keep it open," added Şirinoğlu, who said his own grandfather died in the 1915 events. "There is no need to call the events genocide either."

Şirinoğlu and Herman Balyon, the vice chairman of the executive board of the Armenian hospital, met with Erdoğan after the prime minister caused widespread anger by saying that Turkey could expel 100,000 illegal Armenian immigrants if foreign parliaments continue to pass resolutions endorsing the genocide claims.

Armenians claim up to 1.5 million Armenians were killed during World War I in a systematic genocide campaign at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey categorically rejects the charges, saying the death toll is inflated and that Turks were also killed as Armenians revolted against the Ottoman Empire in collaboration with Russian forces for an independent state in eastern Anatolia. The US House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Parliament recently passed resolutions endorsing the Armenian version of that period of history, angering Turkey.

When Erdoğan said Turkey could deport 100,000 illegal Armenian immigrants, he drew ire from human rights groups, who said this amounts to using destitute people in political bargaining. The number was also contested. A recent study showed the number of Armenians illegally residing in Turkey as between 10,000 and 12,000.

Şirinoğlu took the blame for the mix-up. "We gave the figures to the prime minister. Since he trusted us deeply, he did not check it with other sources. We apologize for this," he said, adding that the correct figure was about 20,000.

Tensions over the genocide claims may go up as US President Barack Obama prepares to issue an annual statement on April 24, the date which Armenians say marks the anniversary of the beginning of the genocide. Despite his pre-election promises, Obama refrained from using the word genocide in his message last year in order not to harm a process of reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia. The two countries signed two protocols last October on normalizing their ties. The steps envisioned in the protocols include the creation of a commission of historians to study the early 20th century events.

When asked if Erdoğan had asked for support from the Armenian community for the reconciliation process with Armenia, Şirinoğlu said there was no such request. "The prime minister is already doing what is necessary to solve problems faced by minorities, for which we are thankful to him," he said. Şirinoğlu was also hopeful that the reconciliation process would succeed. "I expect both Turkey and Armenia will learn from history. This process will be concluded swiftly," he said.

He also said the Armenians felt safe in Turkey and that they had no complaint to that effect. When asked how the Armenian diaspora reacts to his remarks, Şirinoğlu said diaspora representatives should come and see how Armenians live in Turkey. "Those people who have been away from their country for a long time should come and see Armenian property and schools, they should see how Armenians live in Turkey and then they should decide," he said.

The question of what happened to Ottoman Armenians is a sensitive issue in Turkey. Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who called the killings genocide, was killed by a teenage gunman in 2007. His assassin said he had killed Dink because he had insulted Turks.

Many Turks felt frustrated because the Armenian version of history, which is accepted widely in the West, fails to mention Turks and Kurds massacred by Armenian gangs. The European Union, which Ankara aspires to join, urges Turkey to ease laws restricting freedom of speech, under which one can land in court for calling the events genocide.

Şirinoğlu said most of the 1.5 million Armenians who were living in Anatolia when the killings began had migrated to other countries -- Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, the United States, France and others. "I am not saying nothing happened, but there is no benefit in digging deeper into the past. If we do this, our future will remain in the dark," he said.

