ALEPPO ARMENIANS CONVENE

Posted on December 16, 2012 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Translated and abridged by Vahe H. Apelian, 7 December 2012

The attached is an abridged translation of a report from Aleppo that appeared in "Hairenik Weekly" (Nov. 30, 2012). The anonymous author has presumably employed the first and last name initials of two people.

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“What are the dangers facing Aleppo Armenians today and what can the leadership do to circumvent calamity?”

To answer the above question, the Regional Committee of Hamazkayin Cultural Association in Syria invited Armenian community leaders to a Nov. 11 presentation and a roundtable discussion at the Aram Manougian Community Center of Aleppo.

Among the fifty participants were authors, reporters, Armenian language teachers, and members of Armenian cultural organizations. His Grace Bishop Shahan Sarkissian, prelate of the Diocese of Aleppo participated in the meeting.

Before the start of the meeting, attendees watched some 40 colored pictures of the disastrous condition of the mostly-Armenian Aleppo neighborhoods which have been subjected to rampant destruction. The images, taken by professional photographer Ardo Hampartsoumian, showed damaged buildings, looted stores, burnt cars, torched houses of worship, skies blackened with smoke and among these ruins, people in panic. As chairman of the regional Hamazkayin, Hampartousmian opened the meeting. Krikor Doungian, chairman of the Diocese of Aleppo, acted as moderator.

Before the presentation, the prelate emphasized two fundamental points: The present dire circumstances are being experienced not only by Aleppo Armenians, but all Syrians; as a result of the conflict a new culture should emerge not only among Syrian Armenians but also for all Syrians--a culture of collective being, a new way of living.

Four people made presentations.

The first presenter was Raffi Avedissian, from the Committee for the Syrian Armenian Relief. The committee is comprised of representatives from the three denominations, the three political parties and two of the largest benevolent organizations (Armenian General Benevolent Union and the Armenian Relief Society of Syria). Aleppo Armenians have suffered 40 deaths, 66 wounded, seven abductions, and 2 Armenian soldiers whose whereabouts are not known. Approximately 200 houses have been damaged, a great number of work places have been destroyed or ransacked and many cars have been destroyed.

It would be impossible to compensate for such losses. However, the committee, said Mr. Avedissian, renders aid to meet daily needs. Some 2,850 food hampers have been distributed, residences have been provided to families who live in the most dangerous places. Medical care is also rendered. Young Armenian volunteers are on a round-the-clock watch guarding Armenian-owned institutions such as churches, schools and community centers. He also reported that assistance is being flown from Armenia and fundraiser are being organized in various Diaspora communities.

Emma Azarigian read the presentation of Hraztan Tokmajian. For pressing reasons, the latter failed to attend. The presentation dwelt on the role the Armenian cultural organizations during the conflict. Mr. Tokmajian had written that he had attempted not to sound pessimistic and quoted the Armenian saying “Bad days, much like winter, come and go”. In spite of the difficult circumstances, the A.G.B.U. Sarian Art Institute and the Armenian Studies Center of Hamazkayin had resumed their classes since the beginning of November, reported Mr. Tokmajian. He said that was hopeful the cultural life of the community will not be crippled and that the community would resume its vibrant cultural life.

The third presenter was columnist and translator Houry Azezian. She dwelt on the vast cultural heritage Aleppo has inherited, including churches, cemeteries, a museum, archives manuscripts and old books. Azezian noted that we have a responsibility to safeguard the heritage that has been entrusted to us.

The fourth and last presenter was Sarkis Kassarjian, a reporter in the Arabic media. He said that there is a great deal of false reporting in social media and in the mainstream press. He advised the community to stay away from siding with any of the combating sides. He advocated “positive neutrality”--the policy Lebanese Armenians adopted during the civil war there. Arman Saghatelian from “Pan-Armenia Media” also commented regarding this issue.

The presentations were followed by a question-and-answer segment. The ensuing discussion could have been more informative and useful to crystallize a pan-Armenian strategy to help the community emerge from the calamity with relatively little loss. Most of the attendees refrained from asking questions. Perhaps they were being cautious about airing their views publicly or they had nothing to add to the presentations. This is not to say that there was no meaningful discussion.

One of the attendees suggested that a portion of the aid received from Armenia should be

distributed to non-Armenian communities. He suggested that representatives for the Syrian Relief Fund deliver a portion of the aid to local communities. Such a gesture would have a beneficial effect on intra-community relations, he said.

Another noted that despite emigration, the heart of Aleppo has not stopped beating. He cited that this year Sourp Asdvatzatzna Church has registered 85 baptisms and 77 weddings.

Some noted that Facebook accounts which favor the opposition undermine the welfare of the community. The need for a "positive neutrality" policy was agreed to be the safest political positioning for the community.

Following the four-hour presentations and discussion, Prelate-Archbishop Sarkissian noted that the Aleppo community is a conservative and slightly cautious community which shies away from taking bold stands. The panic and the turmoil in the community are partly the community's doing. He noted that in spite of the shortcoming, the Armenian community is the best organized among the 11 Christian communities of the city.

The prelate further noted that the Syrian-Armenian community is an inherent and integral part of Syria and hence assumes its share of the burden of the calamity that has afflicted the country. He also noted that Syrian-Armenians should have empathy for the suffering of other communities as well. The prelate said the Armenian community leadership does not abdicate its responsibility toward its own and sides with no faction and called for all Syrian-Armenians to do the same to safeguard the community.