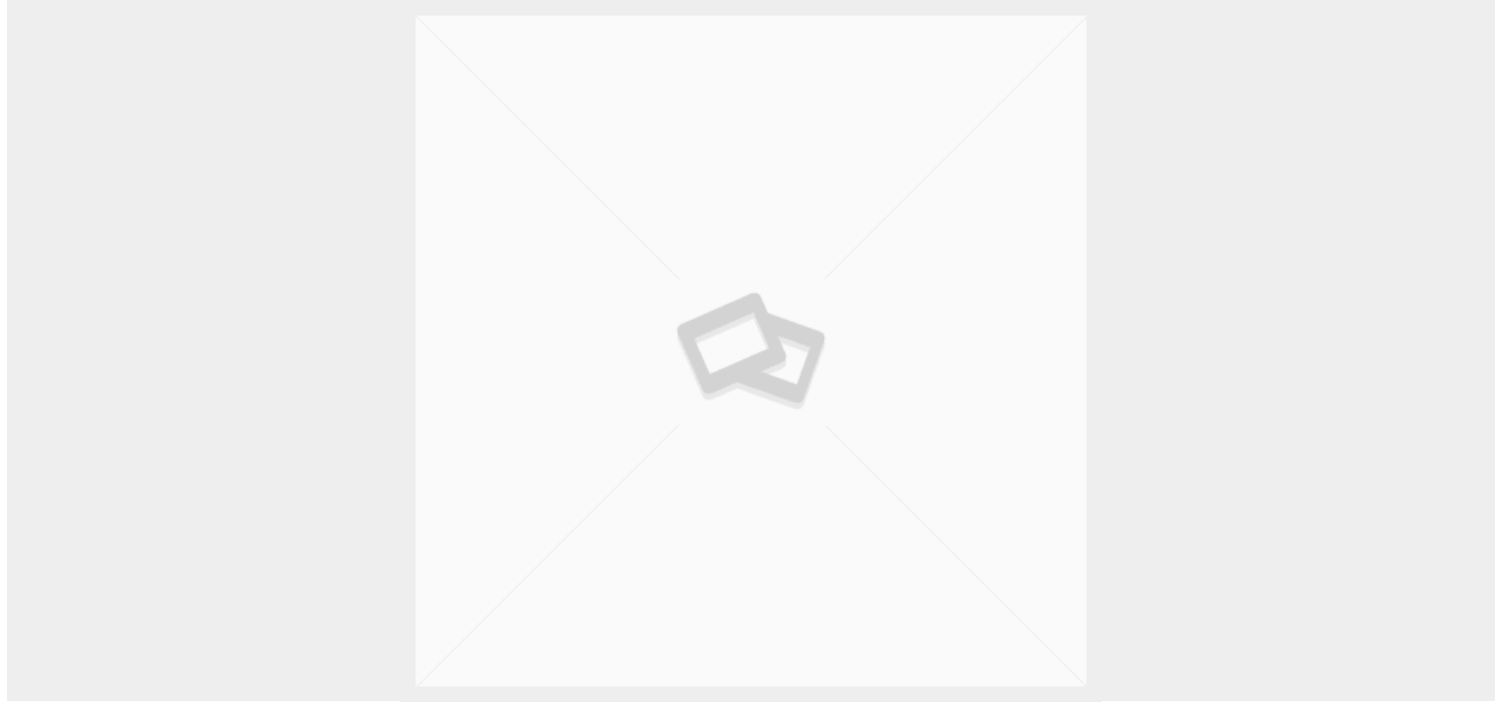


ALEPPO BURNS WHILE WE FIDDLE: A WAKE-UP CALL TO ALL ARMENIANS

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By Harut Sassounian , Publisher, The California Courier, 8 November 2012

For almost two years, Armenians worldwide have followed the vicious civil war in Syria with great anxiety and concern for the safety and survival of their compatriots.

Regrettably, dozens of innocent Armenians were killed or injured by indiscriminate gunfire and shelling, while many others have been kidnapped. Armenian homes, churches and schools were looted, damaged or burned. Thousands of families, scrambling to save themselves, fled to Armenia and the neighboring countries.

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In recent months, as the situation assumed alarming proportions, the Government of Armenia and Diasporan communities finally began making preliminary plans to help Syrian Armenians.

These efforts, although well intentioned, were too little, too late! Until now, there has not been a coordinated and comprehensive plan to deal with this enormous humanitarian crisis. Below is an outline of the three key tasks that require the immediate attention and support of all Armenians:

1) Fundraising: Tens of millions of dollars are required to meet the urgent needs of Armenians in Syria and those who have sought refuge in Armenia, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere. These funds could be raised from both non-Armenian and Armenian sources.

Non-Armenian sources would include: the US Congress, USAID (United States Agency for International Development), UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), international humanitarian organizations, and other governmental agencies.

Armenian sources would include: the Republic of Armenia, major Armenian organizations and businesses, and individual benefactors. Funds could also be raised from the general public through special events, mass mailers, and telethons.

It is regrettable that the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund and its regional affiliates have failed to properly assess the critical condition of Syrian Armenians, as reflected in the inexcusable decision of allocating to them a mere 10% of the proceeds from this year's Thanksgiving Telethon. This has created a strong resentment among the Armenian public toward the Armenia Fund. It is still not too late to take corrective action and allocate the full 100% of the telethon's proceeds to Syrian Armenians both at home and abroad as refugees. Contributors to the telethon should specifically request that 100% of their donations be earmarked to Syrian Armenians. Alternatively, they can donate to the Syrian Armenian Relief Fund, a pan-Armenian committee established in several countries in recent weeks. The Fund will send 100% of the contributions it has collected to its counterpart operating in Syria.

In recent days, I have received heartbreaking phone calls from compatriots in Syria, desperately pleading with Armenians worldwide to help them before it is too late! It is unconscionable to give a mere pittance to fellow Armenians whose lives are at risk every moment! The tragic fate of Syrian Armenians should receive priority attention from all Armenians at this critical juncture, as it is a matter of life and death! All other problems and projects should be placed on the back burner.

2) Lobbying: the Government of Armenia, Armenian political parties, and influential individuals must urge the Great Powers, key neighboring states, and international organizations to pressure all warring sides in Syria to avoid causing civilian casualties. If such pleadings are not fruitful, more stern measures should be taken against offenders by cutting off financial and military assistance, and charging them with war crimes. If need be, demonstrations can be held in front of embassies of countries supporting those responsible for civilian casualties.

3) Coordinating: A pan-Armenian entity should be created, similar to the committee for the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, to coordinate all efforts worldwide for fundraising and lobbying for Syrian Armenians. The members of such a body would consist of the leaders of the Republics of Armenia and Artsakh as well as the representatives of major Diaspora organizations. The coordinating committee must have full-time staff to carry out the necessary tasks in a timely and professional manner. The pan-Armenian entity would interface with the inter-communal committee in Syria to ensure that the donated funds serve their intended purpose.

It is understandable that due to the sensitive nature of the situation in Syria, not all efforts can be publicized. Nevertheless, the Government of Armenia and Diaspora organizations must take some concrete and explicit steps to reassure Syrian-Armenians that they are not abandoned to their tragic fate; that Armenians around the world care deeply for their well-being; and will do everything possible to support them in their greatest hour of need!

