ARMENIA AND TURKEY: FORGETTING GENOCIDE

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Juan Gabriel Tokatlián, Open Democracy, 12 October 2009

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The first presents several problems, which are likely in time to be resolved so that the protocol eventually can be implemented. Undoubtedly, and sooner rather than later, Armenia and Turkey will normalise their ties (as has frequently occurred in so many other cases in the diplomatic history of nations, including former enemies). However, a period devoted to the generation of mutual trust and reciprocal commitments might have generated a framework free from suspicion and fears, oriented towards a more solid opening of bilateral links.

The second protocol is incomprehensible and inadmissible, for it proposes the creation of a sub-committee to examine the "historical dimension" of the relationship between Turks and Armenians. The only "historical dimension" that can be examined is a fact that is irrefutable for everyone alike:

the genocide. This protocol, therefore, aims at "examining" the occurrence of the genocide. The accompanying proposal constitutes the greatest historical setback to the Armenian cause; but neither is it useful for new generations of Turks, who need to build their present and future on thebasis of the truth of their history.
A great number of testimoies of many individuals, Armenian and non-Armenian, provide eloquent evidence of the events of 1915 and after; many images of the events survive, and have been circulated all over the world. The official documents and reports of the time contain copious accounts of what happened, the character and dimensions of an epic atrocity. The Armenian genocide is a fact, not a debate.

Between history and politics

The history of subterfuge and denial in the recognition of the genocide includes the fate of a report submitted to the United Nations sub-committee on human rights in 1973 and 1975 by a Rwandan, Nicodème Ruhashyankiko; this pointed out "the existence of abundant impartial documentation related to the massacre of the Armenian people, considered to be the first genocide of the 20th century". When the report reached the UN committee on human rights in 1979, the paragraph had disappeared. In 1985, anotherreport produced by the British researcher Benjamin Whitaker restored the explicit recognition of the genocide experienced by the Armenians.

In the 1990s, an important number of individual nations recognised the Armenian genocide via legislative laws or executive resolutions. The nascent Republic of Armenia, which attained its independence in 1991, had little to do with this; it was the diaspora that, after decades of efforts, succeeded in reaffirming the cause of the genocide. The diaspora was always ahead of the state in this matter. For the Armenian people, the issue of the genocide has always been a social rather than a state matter. However, it was always clear that its defence was also a guarantee of the survival of the Armenian state.

In this context, the second Armenian-Turkish protocol is opprobrious. Turkey itself has taken no steps towards acknowledging the genocide, yet the government of Armenia itself calls it into question. This raises a number of questions: about the role of Armenia's government and its internal balance, the attitude of Armenian citizens towards the issue of the genocide, the extent of a desire in Yerevan to heal wounds, the absence of a sense of contrition or responsibility in Turkey, the effect of the economic crisis in Armenia on political calculation, and the replacement of the moralpolitik of the fight against genocide by the realpolitik of the oblivion of genocide.

Perhaps a combination of the latter two motives might explain the position of the Armenian government. This would interpret the move in terms of the short-term and material benefits of certain domestic sectors in Armenia, whose position is reinforced by an exaggerated perception of national weakness. If this is the case, it requires a response: a coalition of the diaspora, civic actors in Armenia and influential world opinion in defence of memory and against the pragmatic silencing of

horror.

The Armenian genocide was one of the first and cruellest genocides of the 20th century. Its disdain may be the prelude to widespread impunity. The solitude of the victims - past and present - is the prologue to more barbarism.