ARMENIAN MIGRANTS QUEUE FOR FOOD OUTSIDE PARIS CEMETERY

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By Seda Grigorian, Hetq,12 December 2009

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Père Lachaise is the largest cemetery in Paris proper and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, famous for the numerous celebrities of all stripes buried there.
Waiting there in line with these people, I thought to myself that their relatives and friends back in Armenia would be a bit jealous. After all, they made it to France. But who knows from corners of the city that have travelled to get a bite to eat on this cold wintry holiday eve?

It is not the tomb of General Andranik that has brought them here, but the need for sustenance. Back in Armenia, these people wouldn't even think of visiting a cemetery to get some much needed nutrition. "We don't need the rest of the stuff. We just eat a lot. Hey, we're Armenians. And food is expensive here. Basically, we come here for the meals," said another Armenian woman waiting in line with her daughter. After getting her share, the woman tried to switch her cheese for some bread that others hadn't yet eaten.

Many regret leaving Armenia, but…

"Don't you want to go back to Armenia?" I asked some of them. "Listen, we paid a heap of money to get here. Where can we go? In the beginning, I couldn't adjust but now I'm getting by. My youngest goes to elementary school and the other to "Lycée. We arrived here eight months ago. They've already denied us residency status once, so we've reapplied. We are waiting for the answer."

One of the Armenians I was talking to had come to France for medical reasons. Friends and family had collected enough money for surgery in Armenia but then someone said the best treatment could be found in France. They took the person's advice, returned the money they had collected, and sold their house. They have been here for one month.

"They told us everything thing would be arranged; someone would come to take us from the airport. We were promised money and a place to stay. But it's been a month now and we haven't even seen a doctor for an examination. We move from one hotel to another. We regret the day we arrived. But what can we do? We sold the house in Armenia."

According to the French Ministry of Immigration, 1,143 Armenians received carte de résident (residency cards) in 2008 (Figures for earlier years are: 2007 – 898, 2006 – 941, 2005 – 1128, 2004 – 825, and 2003 – 523). In 2008, 535 RoA citizens received refugee status. This number surpasses that of 2007 and 2006.

In 2008, 980 Armenians signed contracts with the Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration. This contract is entered into with individuals who have either temporarily or permanently left their country of residence and wish to integrate into French society. (For a more detailed explanation of the various Residency Permits for Non-EU Citizens see: Residency in France for EU and non-EU Citizens – Carte de Séjour French Residence Permit)

This "Reception and Integration Contract" stipulates thatforeigners will receive tuition in civics and the French language. Before obtaining a 10-year residence permit, foreigners will have to satisfy the following three integration conditions: commit personally to abide by the principles governing the French Republic, demonstrate that they are indeed complying with them, and have an adequate knowledge of the French language. The Ministry states that in the first quarter of 2009, 943 Armenians entered into such contracts.

There is also a return plan in operation. Those wishing to voluntarily return to their country of origin receive social benefits. In some cases the amount can reach 7,000 Euros to start up a small business upon their return. According to the Office of Immigration and Integration, 34 individuals returned to Armenia in 2008 and 72 more cases are now being processed.

A woman in line at the cemetery told me, "They told us at social services that our president had directed them not to accept any more people. They say that after December 10 they will no longer accept Armenians."

Asylum for Armenians no longer automatic

There have been rumors circulating about this presidential decision at the "France, Terre d'Asile" organization (France, Land of Asylum). Many newly-arrived migrants usually go there to request such status. On the day we visited, three Armenian families were filing applications. They had come from a village in Armenia. "Yeah, I curse the day I came here. At least in Armenia you know it's your country. Here, you don't even know the language. You have to make the best of it," one of them said.

When applying for asylum you have to have some pretty good reasons for leaving. It's a major hurdle. During the years following the Artsakh War many claimed that they were facing a number of problems associated with the conflict – religious and national issues, that they were married to Turks, etc. "You tell them you were born in Sumgait but that you lost the old passport. It's not a problem. You can show them a fake birth certificate made in Armenia. You can't fake an Azerbaijani passport, now can you?" said another Armenian. Many now claim that this "trick" now longer works.

After the events of March 1, 2008, many confess that they have declared themselves to be victims of what transpired. Even this ruse has been exhausted. "Now we don't know what to write down as a reason for seeking asylum. We are searching high and low for something, anything, to jot down. The authorities here have really clamped down on Armenians. They say that the Armenian president has complained to the French, saying why are you accepting all these Armenians? Everything is normal in Armenia," complained one of them.

It is hard to say just how ingenious these and other Armenians will prove to be this time around. In any event, moving back is not an option for many of them. They've sold their homes and exhausted their savings. Some claim that they'll tough it out in France just long enough to make some money; that they'll return to Armenia with money in their pocket to have a roof over their head. Many I spoke to regret ever leaving Armenia.

"At least if the border was open, it would be much easier to go back and forth. We'd come here, see that life ain't all that grand, and then return. We wouldn't have spent all that money so now that we're forced to stay."