CORRUPTION: SOLUTIONS AND THE DIASPORA'S ROLE

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Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 1 June 2014

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Dr. Ouzounian described how, despite many difficulties, the Diaspora has kept the Armenian cultural heritage alive, and aided the fatherland during emergencies such as the earthquake. He then focused on the "catastrophic" depopulation of Armenia and concerns rising from that dismal trend. Aiding Armenian coalitions of forward-thinking groups and individuals to bring about positive change in Armenia is a key mission of the AR, he said and repeated his group's role to inform, engage, and act.

Dr. Berge Minassian, another founding member of the Toronto chapter of the AR, talked about the challenge AR and Armenians in general face in putting an end to corruption in the fatherland. He then introduced famed film director Atom Egoyan who screened the world premier of his personal short feature ("The Illuminator) about Armenia and Armenians.

Bronwen Best of Transparency International spoke in lieu of Varuzhan Hokanyan who didn't attend because he couldn't obtain a visa from Armenia. Ms. Best said corruption undermines a government, results in the misallocation of assets, harms the private sector and hurts the poor.

She said corruption in Armenia is systematic and covers many levels of the government and society. Corruption is rooted in a sense of entitlement, authoritarian style of decision making in business and in politics, in lack of political will and absence of autonomy on the part of the police, the judiciary and other public servants. Loopholes in legislation are other shortcomings which contribute to corruption. Finally, the web of patronage and the networks of monopoly lead to an informal

government which actually makes decisions in Armenia. Armenia is in 94th place on the international corruption index. Australia, with the least corruption, is number one. Canada is in ninth place.

Human rights defender Dr. Artak Zeynalyan, a former deputy minister of health in Armenia, tackled the subject of the independence of judges as a means to fight systematic corruption. He argued that anti-corruption institutions and agencies will not be able to counter systematic corruption as long as the resources of the people are significantly lesser than the resources of the corruptors.

Policy Forum Armenia (PFA) founding member Vladimir Shekoyan of Washington presented the latest corruption findings of his group. Titled "State of the Nation Report on Corruption in Armenia", the survey offers the concrete costs of corruption at macroeconomic, business and household levels.

During her 50 trips to Armenia to provide medicine and medical relief to Armenia and to Artsakh, Dr. Carolann Najarian of Boston has witnessed a great deal of corruption. Indeed, her and her husband's property in Armenia was stolen by local criminals. She talked about the difficulties in obtaining fair and unbiased trial to regain title to their property and to prosecute the wrongdoers.

Dr. Najarian described corruption as "the use of encrusted power for personal or private gain." She then cited that sometimes parents in Armenia can't even obtain birth certificates for their newborn unless they paid a bribe.

Kamo Mailyan of Toronto, study co-coordinator of "Depopulation in Armenia" survey, focused also on corruption and the inefficient judicial system, lack of government accountability and the high level of poverty in Armenia. Citing a 20% decline in Armenia's population in the past two decades, Mr. Mailyan said the most important factor influencing depopulation is lack of hope.

The final speaker was Garegin Chugaszyan, a founding member and coordinator of Pre-Parliament democratic and progressive organization in Armenia. His speech was titled "Is There a Road Map from Deadlock?"

He described Armenia as a post-Soviet colonial society and a dictatorship. He said that because of the current dismal situation in Armenia there's "real fear that we might lose the last Armenian presence in the last portion of Armenia."

During the Q &A, which was moderated by Dr. Dikran Abrahamian of Keghart.com, Mr. Chugaszyan said that while Armenia can't ignore the importance of Russia (supplier of gas at discounted prices), it doesn't mean Armenia should be dictated by Moscow. He stressed that the post-Soviet young generation is the nation's hope for progressive change. Mr. Chugaszyan added that dictatorship makes pre-Parliament a necessity. He also said that the primary assistance Armenia needs from the Diaspora are in the educational and economic fields.

When Mr. Chugaszyan was then asked by an attendee, during Q & A, whether pre-Parliament

members considered the perils involved in their anti-corruption activism, Mr. Chugaszyan said: "If you enter the forest, you must be prepared to encounter wolves."