

LIVELY NCWA ANNUAL MEETING IN YEREVAN

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Gen. Haig Koutoujian

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Correspondent, Yerevan, 15 October 2012

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The wide-ranging agenda covered such topics as how to strengthen the *hayrenagtsagan* (compatriotic associations) network in Armenia and in the Diaspora through better cooperation, reports from NCWA's senior officers' visits to the Armenian community in Istanbul, to California and to Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia. The liveliest exchange was about the efficacy of Armenian approaches to liberal Turks as a starting point for resolving the differences between the two nations. The membership voted to establish two working groups of specialists to spread, in Turkey, information about Armenian rights trampled by the Ottoman Turkey and a second working group to look into related legal matters.

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A resolution was passed to condemn Azerbaijan's aggressive policy toward Armenia, Artsakh, and

the Armenian people. Members agreed that to concede to Azerbaijani demands regarding Artsakh would be futile as long as Azerbaijan denies the massacre of Armenians and the losses suffered by Armenians during the Arstakh war which was initiated by Baku. The delegates insisted that international recognition of Artsakh's liberation is vital and the independence of Arstakh is inviolable. NCWA members also expressed their deep concern regarding the crisis facing Syrian Armenians and Syrians in general. The gathering expressed its gratitude to the Syrian people for their rescue of Genocide-surviving Armenians from 1915 to 1923.

Supreme Court Judge Aghvan Hovsepyan of Armenia pointed out the vital role compatriotic groups can accomplish in Hayababhanoum, the advancement of Armenia, the preservation of Armenian culture and heritage. He said that the gathering was an important venue to unite compatriotic groups from Armenia and the Diaspora. President Seraydarian said the topic will be on the agenda of NCWA's next meeting.

Roupen Keshishian of Argentina provided a synopsis of the Armenian community in his country. He said there are 6 Armenian schools with 600 students, four apostolic, one Roman Catholic and two Protestant churches. Keshishian pointed out that Argentine Armenians, who are mostly of the fourth-generation since the Genocide, are trying to preserve Armenian literature and culture by publishing books about Armenia, Armenian history and by the participation of young people in pan-Armenian games.

Avak Khachadourian of Armenia said the Armenian Question is of concern to all Armenians and thus there should be a pan-Armenian approach which "unfortunately we don't have now because there are serious disagreements." He also said that financial challenges do not allow more extensive work.

NCWA Vice-president Karen Mikaelyan reported that "great work is being done in the Russian Federation" to bring all Armenian organizations in Russia under one umbrella. He indicated that the compatriotic group in Russia should be strengthened.

Mikaelyan also reported on his visits, along with President Seraydarian and retired Gen. Norad Ter-Grigoryants to the Armenian patriarchate in Istanbul, to the Armenian community in that city, and to Catholicos Aram I in Antilias to report on the activities of NCWA. In the past year the trio also visited Armenian communities in Moscow, Krasnodar, Sochi, Vladivostok, Armavir, St. Petersburg, Volgograd, and Abkhazia.

In Istanbul the group visited "Agos" offices and learned how the publication is endeavoring to change Turkish laws so that the country can join the EU and be more civilized and democratic country and arrives to a solution to the Armenian-Turkish conflict. In Antilias the group had discussed how to advance the national campaign from Genocide recognition to the just demands of Armenians.

Mikaelyan said to have a strong Armenian nation it is vital to have strong Diaspora communities. He said Armenians in Russia are doing just that by cooperating, publishing books and helping one

another financially.

Sona Yacoubian, head of the California delegation, said there are now 1 million Armenians in that state. She said that one of the problems in California was that "every two Armenian has its own group, without a vision on how to advance the national cause. Mrs. Yacoubian also expressed her displeasure with Armenian media for failing to report on NCWA activities. She said that Keghart.com is one of the few media outlets which covered NCWA news. Armenian media's failure results in Armenian youths' ignorance of the NGO's activities, she said.

Robert Malkhasian, a lawyer specializing in international rights and a professor at the Buenos Aires University, said the Falkland islands conflict between Britain and Argentina offers an opportunity for Artsakh to present its case for independence. He explained that residents of the islands are demanding the right for self-determination. When the issue is tabled at the United Nations Artsakh must grab the opportunity and present its case for independence.

Arakadz Akhoyan, member of RA National Assembly, said that because of international economic crisis Turkey and the Middle Eastern states are facing new realities. Akhoyan, who has done an extensive tour of Western Armenia in the past year, said Turkey and some Middle Eastern countries might split apart because of ethnic and religious tensions. Almost half of Turkey's population is Kurdish, Alevi, and other ethnic minorities. They all have a high level of ethnic consciousness, said the Armenian member of parliament. Turkey is combating this reality through New Ottomanism and through a "divide and conquer" strategy. These developments provide big opportunities for Armenian demands, he said. "Therefore, in the next six months there is the possibility for concrete activities to get closer to a permanent solution." He also saw an opportunity in working with Turkish civil society. He said it is vital that Armenians cooperate with Kurds and other ethnic minorities who live in Asia Minor because through them the Armenians can find effective spokesmen.

Sevag Ardzrouni said although there is frequent talk about meeting Turkish representatives many Armenians are against such talks. He pointed out that Turkey wants to talk with Armenians and that Turkey is changing. "We should benefit from these realities," he said. He stressed that a great deal had changed in Turkey following the slaying of Hrant Dink. As proof of a changing Turkey, Ardzrouni cited the public apology by Turkish intellectuals and the common use of the word 'Genocide' in Turkish. He recommended that Armenians begin lobbying in Turkey. Ardzrouni offered "practical" eight steps to achieve Armenian goals.

President Seraydarian said that in previous NCWA meetings there had been discussions about holding talks with Turkish representatives and about the nature of such negotiations. "It's better to have links than not to have them," he said. He added that the exchange of opinion should continue and that RA should be made familiar with such discussions.

Seraydarian welcomed recent developments whereby Armenians of Turkey, their patriarchate have had talks with the government which has resulted in the restoration and opening of Armenian

Vice-president Mikaelyan added that during NCWA's representatives' meeting with the Istanbul Armenian community and patriarchate, Armenians had expressed their opposition to meeting Turkish organizations. Mikaelyan and retired General Der-Krikoryants, who visited Istanbul in the past year, said that at the Istanbul Human Rights Centre, Turks had acknowledged the Genocide without wavering. President Seraydarian pointed out it is impossible to cooperate with the Turkish government as long as Ankara doesn't recognize the Genocide.

Meeting participants stressed the importance for NCWA to have a media relations officer, so that organization statements, announcements and activities can be transmitted to the Armenian media. They also said that the proposed NCWA website should be in Armenian, English and Russian.

General Haig Kotounjyan, who pointed that he was participating in the meeting as an individual and not as a representative of RA, outlined the recent and major and successful military maneuvers in Armenia.

Armenologist Haroutune Maroutyan, who has done extensive research on the Genocide and Armenian identity, said that in reality Turkey hasn't changed, although it is trying to show to the world that it has changed. "Turks tell them they are negotiating with Armenians, but in reality it's the process rather than results that interest them," he said. The best way to inform the Turkish public about the conflict is through specialists, through TV panel discussions between Armenians and Turks, and by forcing Turks to look into their identity.

President Seraydarian explained that NCWA has made no decision, at the present time, about creating links with Turkey. He pointed out that RA had rejected the idea of a debate between Armenian and Turkish intellectuals. Delegates from Armenia expressed their concern about RA government's stand and added it would be beneficial to have such debates whereby Armenian specialists from Armenia, the Diaspora Ministry, RA Foreign ministry and Genocide scholars participate because "it's important to have a general approach to achieve success."

While in Armenia for the annual general meeting senior NCWA officers met with RA Minister of Diaspora Hranush Hakobyan. The minister said that in the future there will be close cooperation between her ministry and the NCWA.

Following the meeting, delegates went to Dzidzernagapert to extend their respects to the victims of the Genocide of Armenians.

