NO HARD FEELINGS ON LINCY FUND'S PART

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John Hughes, ArmeniaNow Chief Editor, 21 February 2011

A highly regarded voice of the Armenian Diaspora is speaking out in an attempt to diffuse speculation that last week's decision by American billionaire Kirk Kerkorian to cease giving aid to Armenia is related to misgivings the philanthropist had about how hundreds of millions of dollars he spent here was managed.

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A highly regarded voice of the Armenian Diaspora is speaking out in an attempt to diffuse speculation that last week's decision by American billionaire Kirk Kerkorian to cease giving aid to Armenia is related to misgivings the philanthropist had about how hundreds of millions of dollars he spent here was managed.

When news broke that the Lincy Fund was being dissolved and its $200 million would be transferred to a new fund at UCLA, noted commentator/editor of the California Courier weekly, Harut Sassounian politely bypassed ArmeniaNow's request for comment, saying "I am not the Lincy spokesman".
However, following an article in which questions were raised over what appeared to be uneasy relations between Lincy and local authorities, Sassounian, a former Senior Vice President of the foundation (and executive member through this month) has replied to ArmeniaNow, to Aravot daily and given a weekend interview to television to say that the Lincy Foundation has had no conflict nor misgivings about the execution of its goodwill in Armenia.

Asked why the fund was shutting down, presumably cutting off a flow of philanthropy that has benefited nearly every aspect of social life in Armenia over more than a decade, Sassounian deferred, saying that "only Mr. Kerkorian can answer that question. I am not Mr. Kerkorian and have no right to answer on his behalf".

The outspoken editor/advisor is not shy, however, in his efforts to "correct inaccurate information" centering around a broad public perception that Kerkorian pulled his money because he didn't approve of the way it was handled by local administrators.

To say that Lincy funds were mismanaged – as has been alleged by members of the political opposition and others – is "a false allegation," Sassounian says. "No Lincy funds were mismanaged."

He further rebuked as "completely false" allegations that Lincy's $170 million cultural project in 2001-03 (that enabled road construction, and the renovation of prominent cultural landmarks) was widely seen as a feast of riches for unscrupulous opportunists, who according to a suspicious public were believed to have siphoned part of the monies for personal enrichment.

Concerning reports that then chief of presidential staff Artashes Tumanyan was relieved from his

role in Lincy local administration following an investigation by the Control Service of the President, Sassounian says that Tumanyan was dismissed "due to his formation of an independent political party, and not for anything to do with the Lincy projects". This was also officially announced reasons for his quitting.

Against charges from former educator and current MP of the Heritage Party, Anahit Bakhshyan that Lincy money was designated to renovate 17 schools, when in fact only 10 were completed:

"This is not true. The plan all along was to renovate only 10 schools and all 10 schools were indeed renovated. The additional seven schools were never intended to be renovated. They were simply listed on the MOU (memorandum of understand) as extras, in case there were leftover funds or if Lincy decided to increase the funding and renovate one or more of the additional schools," Sassounian says.

Sassounian says, too, that the lawmaker "is completely mistaken" in her belief that the government did not fulfill its obligation to compensate the Lincy funds with money from the state budget, when a sharp rise in the strength of the local currency, dram, saw an equal devaluation of the dollars allotted by Lincy for the school renovation project.

"The government did bridge the gap and added a substantial amount of funds from the national budget to complete the planned 10 schools," Sassounian says.

Sources familiar with the Lincy efforts have told ArmeniaNow that during the last few years of its cultural charity work in Armenia, representatives of the fund were from time to time at odds with how the program was being handled by local authorities, prompting meetings with then president Robert Kocharyan to air grievances.

A particular example was the well-known incident of roadways and sidewalks having to be constructed a second time, presumably at additional costs, due to the low-quality work carried out in the original effort.

As the media and public ponder reasons why the 93-year old billionaire appears to have made his last contribution to his ethnic homeland, Sassounian warns against assumptions.

Pointing to a recent $10.5 million Lincy donation to the United Armenian Fund, Sassounian says: "I fail to see any sign of disappointment here. Let's not draw unwarranted and erroneous sweeping generalizations from the simple and basic facts. No conspiracies are warranted."