

# HUGE 'ODAR' CROWD AT GENOCIDE COMMEMORATIONS

*Posted on January 26, 2015 by Keghart*



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**Reporter**, 26 January 2015

***In the past year Keghart.com has promoted the idea that when commemorating the centennial of the Genocide Armenians should make an effort to invite non-Armenians to participate or at least tell the story to them. The below gathering in Toronto had more than 900 attendees with 90% non-Armenian.--Editor.***

"We have a moral obligation of memory for the century of tears which began with the genocide of Armenians," said Hon. Jason Kenney, the Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister of Multiculturalism at a Toronto gathering, on January 25, for the centennial commemorations of the Genocide of Armenians which was attended by more than 900 people. Mr. Kenney also said that Canadians have a special obligation to join the "Armenians across the world in a sacred act of memory."

The gathering, organized by Majed el-Shafi, founder and president of One Free World International (OFWI), took place at the Catch the Fire revivalist congregation's centre west end of the city. Three members of parliament, including the parliamentary secretary; Armenia's Ambassador to Canada Armen Yeganian; and representatives of more than a dozen ethnic, religious and human rights groups took part in the remembrance gathering.

Mr. Kenney said Armenians are the first nation to adopt Christianity as state religion and that they had "suffered waves and waves of persecution" for their religion. "They are among the greatest underdogs of history...they are a people who have tasted the bitter pill of violence and persecution" he added.

"When I visited Armenia last year, I was greatly impressed by the fidelity and courage of Armenians," Mr. Kenney said. After condemning the current persecutions of Christians in Iraq, he pointed out that Armenians were once again being victimized for their religion and ethnicity but this time in Iraq where forefathers had sought shelter after the Genocide. In closing his speech, the minister reconfirmed Canada's recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

Rev. Shafie, who was jailed and tortured in Egyptian jails because he had converted from Islam to Christianity, established the OFWI after settling in Canada. The mission of his organization is to defend religious freedom and human rights around the globe. He has toured Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, India, and Bangladesh and confronted officialdom everywhere he has gone and assisted individuals and groups who are persecuted for their ethnicity and religious beliefs. He also visited Armenia last year and met Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian and visited Echmiadzin.

Clippings from the video he made of his Armenia and Iraq trips were screened at the beginning of his presentation.

After talking about the importance of forgiveness, Rev. Shafie said the Canadian government should "press Turkey to open the border with Armenia and persuade Israel, the United States, Australia and

the United Kingdom, to recognize the Armenian Genocide." He also said he looks forward to the opening of a Canadian embassy in Yerevan.

As a token of appreciation and gratitude for his work, Rev. Shafie was presented by certificate of citation by the Armenian Canadian Conservative Association. The presentation was made by Vache Demirdjian, the national chair of the group.

Other speakers included lawyer Chantal Desloges and Egyptian-born Rev. Hany Bogossian, pastor of The Well on Bayview Church in Toronto. In his message about the importance of forgiveness, Rev. Bogossian quoted the 12<sup>th</sup> century Armenian religious leader and writer St. Nerses Shnorhali.

Ambassador Yeghanyan demanded that Turkey acknowledge Genocide and listed the reverberating and tragic consequence of the Genocide. He said that despite the attempt to exterminate them, the Armenian people had risen again and founded an independent state.

Ambassador Yeghanyan said the Armenian Genocide was the model for ethnic group extermination as political strategy. He said that the Ukrainian Holodomor, the Holocaust, the Cambodian and Rwandan Genocide had their origins in the Armenian Genocide. The ambassador also indirectly condemned politicians and historians for not including the 1.5 million Armenian dead in their count of WWI casualties. He said that about three-quarters of the Armenian nation were slain during the Genocide yet that almost-mortal hurt was not even considered as casualty. He added that Assyrians and Greeks also suffered genocide as a result of Ottoman ethnic cleansing. The ambassador said that there will be at least 60 Genocide commemorations in Canada this year. Archpriest Zareh Zargarian of the Holy Trinity Armenian Church thanked Canada for recognizing the Genocide.

Final speaker Hakan Tastan, pastor of the Life Church in Istanbul, added further drama to the gathering by his presence and by what he said. It was the first time anyone had made a Christian Turk. A convert to Christianity, he had specially flown to Toronto to participate in the commemorations. Rev. Tastan said he converted 19 years ago while visiting an Armenian church in Svaz, Turkey. He added that his grandfather, who as a child had witnessed the Genocide, had described graphically the killing of Armenians. Rev. Tastan apologized to Armenians on behalf of the Turkish nation and exchanged a Turkish Bible and Armenian Bibles with Rev. Bogossian. The Turkish clergyman said that he looked forward to building an Armenian/Turkish association to be called ArTur which would act as a bridge between the two nations. Writer Raffi Bedrosyan translated Rev. Tastan's message.

The commemorations were opened by Pastor John Arnott of the Catch the Fire congregation. Also attending the gathering were representatives of the Evangelical Asian Church, the Bahai community, the United Christian Federation, Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian, Alevi communities, Federation of Democratic China, B'nai Brith, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamat, Emergency Relief and Development Overseas, Yazidi Human Rights Organization International, the Archdiocese of Toronto, the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem, Falun Dafa Associations of Toronto and Ottawa, the

The Turkish ambassador and consul general had been invited to the gathering but they refused to participate because the word "genocide" was mentioned in the invitation. Concerned in Turkish agitation, Rev. Shafi had hired a security service.

Representatives from the Armenian Canadian Conservative Association, the Armenian Community Centre, Social Democrat Hunchagian Party, the advisor to the Armenia's Minister of Diaspora, Hayastan All-Armenia Fund, Armenian Evangelical Church of Toronto and many other individual Armenians were present at the two-and-a-half-hour gathering.

Later the same day pastor Tastan delivered a speech titled "The Church in Turkey and Armenian/Turkish Reconciliation" at the Armenian Evangelical Church of Toronto.

**Commemoration ceremonies at 19:30**

**His Excellency Armen Yeghanyan, Ambassador of Armenia at 40:45**

**Hon. Brad Butt MP at 54:44**

**Hon. Jason Kenney MP, Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism at 57:12**

**Mr. Vache Demirdjian, Chair of ACCA at 2:02:59**

