PRACTICAL ACTION FOR OVERDUE REPARATIONS

Posted on May 10, 2016 by Keghart

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Category: Opinions

Vart Adjemian, Fort Lauderdale FL, 12 May 2016

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Payments started on March 12, 1951 when Israel's foreign minister Moshe Sharett submitted a note to the four Allied governments claiming compensation to Israel of $ 1.5-billion from the German Federal Republic (West Germany at the time). The claim was based on the financial cost absorbed by Israel for the rehabilitation of Jews who had escaped and survived the Nazi regime and had settled in the newly-created Jewish state.

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In January 1952, after a fierce debate in the Knesset, a resolution was passed to enter into direct negotiations with West Germany on reparation amounts. On Sept. 10, 1952, after six months of negotiations, an agreement between West Germany and Israel was signed for $1-billion. It came into effect on March 12, 1953.

The agreement was carried out. This was followed by other reparation agreements. In 1988, the German government allocated another $125-million, enabling remaining Holocaust survivors to receive monthly payments of $290 for the rest of their lives. In 1999, as a result of numerous class action lawsuits in American courts, the German government and German industry agreed to compensate Jews and non-Jews for slave and forced labor they had performed for German industry during the war. German companies that came under the lawsuit were Deutsche Bank AG, Siemens, BMW, Volkswagen and Opel. In return of dismissal of such lawsuits and guaranteeing German industry legal peace from such litigation, the German government created the "Remembrance,

Responsibility and the Future" foundation with assets of $5-billion.

A substantial portion of Germany's reparation payments have been made to the New York City-based "Jewish Claims Conference" (JCC) which has operated for decades as a supranational governmental agency for Jews around the world. The JCC was established in 1951. In September 2014, the JCC and Germany established an additional $250 million fund of the child survivors of the Holocaust.

Germany accepted responsibility for the Holocaust and entered into several other agreements for compensation for crimes committed by the Nazis. Germany did not hide. It did not deny the crimes by seeking reasons or excuses. No attempts were made to revise history. There is no sign that German reparations will stop anytime soon.

Kudos and admiration to the Jews, the Israeli government, and the JCC. They have successfully, continuously and relentlessly pursued and found means and ways to receive substantial amounts in reparations. This has been a major financial source to help the victims, to build communities, to embark on social programs and to make a material contribution to Israel's economy.

What did Armenians get for our 1.5 million genocide victims, the properties and the land that was stolen and confiscated, the churches that were looted, deserted and left in ruin, the survivors who barely made it to new shores to start new lives with nothing except the clothes on their back, the orphans who were traumatized and grew up without knowing what happened to their mothers, fathers, sisters or brothers?

We got absolutely nothing...zero-zilch-nil.

Not only did we get nothing after 101 years despite the existence of undeniable proof and documentation in the archives of various governments which were involved or witnessed the Genocide, museums, libraries, newspapers' records, eyewitness reports but the Turkish government continues its denial and along with the Azeri government conspires and colludes, and threatens Armenia's and Artsakh's existence.

Some 20 countries have formally recognized the Genocide. This is not sufficient to make a dent in global recognition. The silence and the cowardice of the international community is unacceptable--notably the US, the UK, Australia, Brazil, Germany, etc. Members of NATO have lost their moral compass. The U.S. president shamefully hides behind the hollow "Medz Yeghern" and succumbs to Turkish blackmail, blind to Turkey's continued human rights violations and transgressions. The OSCE-Minsk process is totally inept, ineffective, biased and prefers to play word games.

The Armenian economy suffers immensely from the state of war. We do not know if Russia is an ally or using us as a pawn.

We do not have an equivalent to the JCC. There's a lot of talk but no walk.

Every year, on April 24th, in various cities around the world, we organize marches, demonstrations, rallies, and commemorations attended by thousands of people. These are impressive and heart-warming. They are helpful to the soul but have not brought forth tangible results. They also run the risk of circular self-talk and podiums for local politicians to seek votes.

It's obvious that we need a different approach if we are to force Turkey to compensate. We might not have the means Israel and Jews have, but we do have considerable resources. What is missing is leadership and organization.

Actions that we need to take:

1. Diasporan organizations and political parties have to make a concerted effort to form a commission which will draft a plan of action demanding reparations from Ankara. Right now we are fragmented. Even though our organizations pursue worthy causes, we do not have a focus on a single crucial cause on which we all agree. The recent trend among some communities to jointly commemorate April 24 is encouraging but if we do not extend that to more concrete actions, the joint commemorations could become lip service for a united front.

2. The government of Armenia should enhance its dialogue with the Diaspora. Yerevan should also bring its expertise to evaluate the legal aspects of the reparation campaign and the avenues we have to take. The government of Armenia should also become the legal plaintiff and representative of all Armenians.

3. Throughout the world we have expert lawyers and a number of bar associations. There are also non-Armenian lawyers who support our cause and would be willing to join our national effort. We have to tap these two resources and put together the best legal team possible.

4. After the commission is established and the legal team is in place, the latter will have to review the legalities, prepare the brief and the case, and decide on the most effective actions to take (what to file, choose venue, court and jurisdiction where the case will be heard, etc.).

5. How to fund the reparation campaign? A single fund, with a single name has to be established for a single and specific aim: to fund expenses linked to the reparation campaign. Since the United States, after Russia, has the biggest Armenian Diaspora, the fund should be based in the US. It should be overseen by a board of trustees.