PROJECT REBIRTH: HOMECOMING OF HIDDEN ARMENIANS

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Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 11 August 2015

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The trip is part of a wide range of activities now formally named Project Rebirth - VERADZNOUNT supporting Islamicized Armenians. This year, 80 selected Islamicized Armenians were brought from Turkey to the homeland, to participate in the Ari-Tun event organized by the Ministry of Diaspora. The trip was organized and sponsored by Raffi Bedrosyan, with partial contributions from the Caloust Gulbenkian Foundation, AGBU Asbeds and a few individuals.

Following several months of planning, fundraising, organizing and negotiating with government officials and hotels in Armenia, the trip was set for the first week of August. The participants were met in Yerevan by the organizer of the tour who flew in from Toronto. The timing of the trip was made to coincide with the Pan Armenian Games which brought more than 6,200 Armenian athletes from all over the world, including 450 from Turkey, representing historic Armenian homeland teams from Van, Bitlis, Mush, Dersim, Diyarbakir and Musa Ler.

This year more emphasis was placed on having younger generation participants in the trip, and several children of the people who came last year were now part of the group. The age of the participants ranged from 11 to 87. The Islamicized Armenians came from all walks of life, --teachers, lawyers, artists, writers, poets, high school and university students, business people, housewives and retirees. They may have had different perspectives, but they all shared one common goal--searching and finding their Armenian roots. Their life stories and quest for their roots are as different

as themselves. They are all descendents of the 'living victims' of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, orphaned Armenian boys and girls captured, protected, hidden or bought by Turks and Kurds, who became Islamicized, Turkified and Kurdified. As grandchildren of these assimilated orphans, they have become aware of their Armenian roots during different stages of their lives. Some found out about their Armenian origins at an early age, while others discovered in their adulthood, at the deathbed of their parents and gransparents.

During the trip they eagerly participated in Armenian language classes every morning, followed by expeditions to significant historic sites during the day, and cultural events in the evenings. Interestingly, the participants from the Hamshen region already spoke a dialect of Armenian, and they could easily understand or be understood by Armenians on the street. One of the Armenian cultural events the entire group attended was a concert by pianist Raffi Bedrosyan who performed works of Komitas, Khatchaturian, Alan Hovhaness and Edgar Hovanissian. The full-house concert and the activities of the group were covered widely by Armenian media and TV.

As a result of the trip the participants will no more be hidden Armenians when they return to Turkey, as their real identities will be revealed at considerable risk to themselves and their families. They may be discriminated against by their employers, lose their jobs if working in the public sector, lose their Moslem friends, neighbours, and even the rest of their families who prefer to remain Moslem Turks or Kurds, but they are all willing to take the risk.

Throughout the trip, the expectations, short and long term goals of Project Rebirth and the needs of the hidden Armenians were discussed. As courageous people willing to take the risk of revealing their Armenian identities, the participants need support mechanisms related to Armenian language instruction, increased interaction and exchanges with cultural groups to and from Armenia, technical and professional help related to restoration projects for abandoned or destroyed Armenian churches, cemeteries and other monuments in their cities and villages.

More importantly, they may need financial, legal and social services help for family and employment problems triggered through the revelation of their Armenian identities. The expectations of the Project Rebirth organizers can be summed up as willingness by these new Armenians to learn the Armenian language and history, organize among themselves toward planning and implementing the restoration of Armenian churches and buildings, arrange regular social and cultural activities to encourage others to 'come out', and more critically, pass along their desire to return to Armenian roots to their children and the next generation.

The goals and objectives of Project Rebirth are now well defined and a few of the short term goals are already achieved. One example was the agreement negotiated between the organizer and the Ministry of Diaspora last year to have two university students from Diyarbakir who had participated in last year's trip to continue their studies in Armenia with free tuition. After a year of intensive

Armenian language instruction in Yerevan University, we watched with great pride and satisfaction as one of these students acted as guide and translator to the participants of this year's trip.

The ultimate goal of Project Rebirth is nothing short of creating an Armenian presence again on historic Armenian lands within Turkey, in people, culture and architecture.

Although there is support and appreciation by certain influential leaders in Armenia, the significance and potential of Project Rebirth is not fully understood yet by some Diaspora leaders and organizations. Commemorating victims of the Genocide is such a major preoccupation that supporting the potential Armenian presence within historic Armenia is still a much lower priority. The organizers of the project hope that with increased understanding of the new realities related to the hidden Armenians in Turkey, Armenians in Diaspora and Armenia will be able to undo some of the damages of the past through Project Rebirth.