SOCCER DIPLOMACY VS. 'I APOLOGIZE'

Posted on January 31, 2009 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Khatchig Mouradian, Editor of Armenian Weekly, Watertown MA

Article appeared in Radikal , Istanbul, 25 January 2009

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The year 2008 was eventful for Turkish-Armenian relations. Armenian President Serge Sarkisian invited his Turkish counterpart, Abdullah Gul, to visit Armenia and watch the Armenia-Turkey World Cup qualifier soccer match. Both the Armenian and Turkish sides had given new momentum to behind-the-scenes meetings, which culminated in Gul's acceptance of the invitation a few days before the match. On Sept. 6, Gul's plane landed in Yerevan making him the first Turkish president to visit the capital.

When Sarkisian first extended the invitation, the media began referring to the ongoing Turkey-Armenia dialogue as "Soccer Diplomacy." The exchange of ping-pong players in the early 1970's between China and the U.S. paved the way for President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, and was known as "Ping Pong Diplomacy." The media was comparing the two, but the comparison is at best superficial. While such a term could be fitting to the rapprochement between two powerful countries like the U.S. and China, a similar description for Turkey and Armenia is misleading because it assumes that they are "competing" on a level playing field. Not only is there a glaring power asymmetry between Turkey and Armenia, but that power asymmetry is largely a result of the genocide perpetrated against the Armenians during World War I.

Which brings me to the campaign launched by 200 intellectuals in Turkey on December 15, apologizing for the Armenian Genocide.

The apology read: "My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them."

Within two weeks, around 25,000 Turks had signed the petition. A taboo was broken. Apologizing from Armenians became a topic of discussion in Turkey.

The campaign saw an immediate and violent backlash from nationalists in Turkey. It also generated

a great deal of discussion among progressive intellectuals, both in public and private, about the motives of the initiators of the campaign and the text of the apology.

Yet undeniably, the apology campaign was a milestone. More so than "Soccer Diplomacy," I would argue.

The campaign attempted to do something "Soccer Diplomacy" had completely neglected: to address some of the root causes of the conflict between Turks and Armenians. Moreover, while "Soccer Diplomacy" was an affair between the Turkish and Armenian governments, the apology was more inclusive as it was addressed to all Armenians. In fact, the Armenian translation of the apology, made available on the website of the apology (http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com), was in Western Armenian—the dialect spoken by Diasporan Armenians.

The true transformation of Turkish-Armenian relations cannot take place without involving all sectors and levels of the affected populations. "Soccer Diplomacy" was not Turkish-Armenian dialogue, as it was portrayed in the Western media; it was Turkey-Armenia dialogue and ignored the large Diaspora, which is comprised of the descendents of survivors of the Armenian Genocide who were driven away from their ancestral lands and scattered around the world.

The apology campaign began addressing the root causes of the Turkish-Armenian issue. Without such initiatives, traditional diplomacy resolves too little, late, and risks looking like mere make-up on a deeply scarred face.