TURKEY, CANADA, AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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By Jasmeet Sidhu, Toronto Star Blog, May 27 2010

The first thing I immediately noticed when I arrived in Turkey, was the price to get into the country. While British and American VISAs were only about $20, Canadians had to pay a whopping $60 for a VISA to enter the country. I never really thought about why, until we met with members of the Turkish foreign ministry in Ankara, Turkey.

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Here in Turkey with my Peace and Conflict studies class to learn more about this dynamic and culturally rich country in the face of today's changing geopolitics, one topic that inevitably came up time and time again in our various meetings with Turkish officials was the Armenian genocide. And the discussions certainly took a more interesting turn when we revealed to people that we were Canadian.

Thus far, Canada's parliament is the only one in the world that has formally recognized the killing of Armenians in Turkey during the First World War as genocide.

Meeting at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara, Turkey

At the time in 2004, the Turkish foreign ministry released a statement, declaring "Some narrow-minded Canadian politicians were not able to understand that such decisions based on ... prejudiced information, will awaken feelings of hatred among people of different roots and disturb social harmony."

So when we met with members of the Turkish foreign ministry in the capital, Ankara, we weren't sure what to expect. Though we hadn't told them that this was a topic that we specifically wanted to discuss, as if reading our minds, an Armenian historian who had once worked in Canada joined our meetings, and the discussion inevitably went towards the Armenian genocide for the majority of the meeting. It was a fairly amicable and pleasant meeting, however, with an obvious agenda on their side to get their story across to Canadian students who would inevitably be discussing their thoughts with other Canadians (like I am right now).

The narrative that the foreign ministry put forward was emphasizing a lack of intent, and relying on

the legal definition of the genocide to put into question "the events of 1915" as they were referred to in the meeting. Indeed, "genocide" was not even a legal term back in 1915 and the convention on genocide did not exist until 1948, so how can one declare a genocide to have happened?

Also, genocide needs intent to eliminate an entire groups of people. This, one member of the Turkish foreign ministry declared, did not exist. As well, they argued, Turkey has always been open about this issue and has argued for a joint historical investigation with Armenia to discover what really happened in 1915, but Turkey claims that Armenia are not open to the process or willing to open its private records on the event. Probably the most fascinating part of the discussion was when the foreign ministry urged us to be "Canadian" and live up to "Canadian values" by having an open mind and listening to both sides of the story. They argued that they were being accused of the most heinous crime and urged a proper historical investigation before parliaments pass judgments on controversial aspects of history, for which they have no role.

I walked away from the meeting not necessarily sure what to believe, but feeling compelled to read and research more about this dark aspect of Turkish history. And I suppose that was the real purpose of this meeting, whether we had just heard propaganda or the "memory record of another people" as it was called -- to not depend on simply just one side of the story, and to be your own critic of events and issues by doing the research yourself and coming to the best possible conclusion you can.

Jasmeet Sidhu is a graduate of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Toronto. She worked for the Star in the radio room last summer, and writes a blog for the Star on climate change, where she covered the UN Climate Change conference in Copenhagen. In mid-June she will join the Star's summer intern program. Follow Jasmeet on Twitter.

Keghart.com welcomes Jasmeet Sidhu's article, but encourages its readers to respond to gross misconceptions that have appeared in her piece, such as Canada being the only country that has recognized the Genocide of Armenians, the Armenian archives not being open for studies, etc.