

**Speech By Hrant Dink to the International Publisher's Association/International PEN panel discussion on Freedom of Expression in Turkey held at the UN Commission on Human Rights April 2004**

**The situation of the Armenian Community in Turkey as of April 2004-04-28**

The minorities' concept of the Turkish State covers only the Non-Muslim communities as defined at Lausanne Treaty. The number of these minorities is about 100.000 people and within them the Armenian community constitutes the largest group with a population of 60.000.

Before dwelling on some of the relevant problems of the Armenian Community of Turkey faces today, it is necessary to underline an important phenomenon. Minorities as individuals (real persons) do not face any obstacles concerning economical freedom, being equal before law and human rights. The only exception is the fact that minority members cannot be high rank soldiers, State officers and bureaucrats. Especially concerning their religious beliefs, they enjoy a complete freedom without any pressure. But at this point too, there is a vital problem of not having an educational institution to raise any clergy. Problems such as "inability to train clergy", "statute of the Patriarchy" are frequently expressed by Patriarchy of Armenians in Turkey.

**The inability of Minority Foundations to obtain real estates**

Unfortunately, minorities do not enjoy the same freedom of individual basis when it comes to their institutional rights. The main problem on institutional basis is the fact that minority foundations are not able to obtain real estates. Until 30 years ago, they could get real estates, but later on they were not allowed to obtain real estates. Moreover, the real estates they possessed prior to this date were taken back from their original owners and returned to the Treasury.

Due to the increased complaints about this injustice, within the framework of adaptation laws, a law was ratified by the National Assembly on August 2002 enabling Minority Foundations to obtain real estates. Moreover, despite the new arrangement foreseen in the law, Minority foundations have still not been in the position to achieve a concrete result concerning the registration of the real estates, which they possess. However much this law seems to bring new rights, it has not solved the problem of unjust confiscations. Within the last 30 years, more than 30 real estates of Armenian Foundations have been taken from them by verdict of the Court, the title-deeds of these real estates have been cancelled, 95% of them have been transferred to the Treasury while some others have been returned to their previous owners.

Until now, there has not been an attempt for the return of these real estates confiscated by the State. It is the task of the Government to immediately let these real estates return to Minority Foundations which are still owned by Treasury and to identify the

ones given to private persons by the value of today. It is not possible to claim that injustice has been removed without giving back the real estates to Armenian foundations.

### **An example of the problems in educational life**

Armenian pupils who wish to go to Armenian schools have to prove at the beginning of every school year that their parents are Armenian. Although the articles at the new Civil Code equalizes sanctity of the father and the mother, the registration problem of the children of “Mixed marriages” (mother Armenian, father Turc or vice versa) continues. Still registration to school is enabled only to children whose fathers are Armenian, but not to those whose mothers are Armenian. This unjust and sexist registration practice should be lifted and registration right should be approved also the children of mixed marriage whose mothers are Armenian as well.

### **Curriculum of History Books**

Since a few years, Turkey is making special efforts with the framework of “Struggle Against Unfounded Armenian Claims” and against the discourse and studies presented by Armenians spread all over the world about “Armenian Genocide”. An important part of these efforts is devoted to the works in school. For this purpose, a new curriculum has been prepared focusing on the unfoundedness of Armenian claims, the text books prepared about this issue will start to read in our schools starting at the next school year. Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Education has sent to all schools, including Armenian ones, a circular letter on April 14, 2003 demanding from the schools to organise conferences and composition competitions dealing with the struggle against unfounded Armenian Genocide claims”. Human rights associations and Bar of Diyarbakir have brought suits at the Supreme Council stating that this circular letter is contrary to international agreements and that it can lead to feelings of hostility among children, thus demanding the nullity and cease execution of it. But the Ministry did not take back the circular letter.

This mentality has a wrong attitude. It leads generations to be raised as enemies to each other by dictating to the brain of children one-sided information about a subject on which even the adults have not agreed among themselves. In fact, school should be the place where the information is questioned, not dictated.

Moreover, Armenian history cannot be taught in Armenian Schools. It is a psychological torture to demand from the young people whose right to learn their own history of three thousand years has been prevented, to learn lessons denying their own history and identity and even to expect them to write humiliating sentences about their history and identity.

The fact that the Armenian Genocide is still a taboo subject is proven by two recent examples:

1. The display of the film “Ararat” was hindered due to the threats of ultranationalist groups (the Ministry had allowed the display).
2. The news of AGOS about Sabiha Gökçen, the 1<sup>st</sup> war woman pilot in Turkey who is known as the adopted daughter (passed away a few years ago) of Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, that her origin may be Armenian caused great reaction. Reactions varied from the claims of her being Armenian origin is a blow

against the unity and integrity of Turkey to questions about what kind of plots were present behind the publication of such kind of a news. Of course, there were also democratic reactions that Gökçen can naturally be Armenian.

Afterwards a backbite campaign against our newspaper Agos and editor-in-chief Hrant Dink by columnists of extreme nationalist newspapers. An extreme nationalist group made a demonstration in front of the newspaper's building by crying out discriminating slogans and threats.

These 2 developments reveal once again how difficult it is to speak about the "Armenian issue". However, Turkey should be able to take this historical issue back to its original territory, preventing it to be discussed and used as a trump at international political area. This can only be possible by providing a free atmosphere of speech and expression, where alternative thesis can also be discussed too.

### **Problem of teachers of Armenian language**

Because of the fact that there is no Armenian and Literature Department at Universities, no teacher of Armenian language can be trained at academic level. A department should be founded as soon as possible either at the Literature Faculty of Istanbul University or at one of the private universities.

### **Conclusion**

We can say that no striking improvement has been witnessed with the last year concerning the relations of Turkey with Minority groups. Despite the good will of political power and despite the fact that laws have been accepted at National assembly, it draws the attention that the bureaucracy in charge of putting these laws into practice is in an attitude contrary to the laws and is continuously creating difficulties.

At the bottom of these problems, which seem to be independent of each other, there lies the mentality, which regards Armenians not as principal citizens of this country, but as foreigners, as "others" which can turn to potential threat against the security of the country as an "inner focus". If this mentality does not change, it is apparent that no great improvement can be achieved through superficial arrangements.

On the other hand, the tendency of many Turkish intellectuals to learn Armenian history, problems and culture, to discuss about them and to see Armenian community as a richness for the country, gives hope for the future by creating a sound demand right from the bottom to the top. Undoubtedly, a Turkey regarding all its different aspects as a wealth will have many new values to contribute to the European Union.

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