

Armenia

Question for Short Debate

5.30 pm

Tabled By Baroness Cox

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will reconsider their position with regard to the recognition as genocide of the events in Armenia from 1915 to 1917.

Baroness Cox: My Lords, I begin by declaring an interest as chairman of the British-Armenian All-Party Parliamentary Group and as a recipient of various

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non-financial awards during 69 visits to Armenia and Karabakh. I am grateful to all noble Lords contributing to this debate, which is timely for several reasons. First, the Swedish Parliament and the US Congress Foreign Affairs Committee have recently recognised the Armenian genocide, which was already acknowledged by France, Italy, Poland, Greece, Cyprus, Belgium, Slovakia, the Netherlands, the Holy See, Russia, Canada, Uruguay, Argentina, Lebanon and, I am happy to say, the National Assembly for Wales. Moreover, the Swedish Parliament also recognised the genocide by Turkey of the Assyrian Christian and Greek peoples.

Secondly, last October a significant report was published: *Was there an Armenian Genocide? Geoffrey Robertson QC's opinion with reference to Foreign & Commonwealth Office documents which show how British Ministers, Parliament and people have been misled*. Thirdly, this year marks the 95th anniversary, and recognition is long overdue. Each unrecognised genocide can encourage subsequent genocides, which is infamously illustrated by Hitler's reference to the Armenian genocide before he began the Holocaust in Poland:

„I have sent my Death's Head units to the East with the order to kill without mercy men, women and children of the Polish race or language. Only in such a way will we win the lebensraum that we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?“.

Whenever initiatives are taken to encourage recognition of the Armenian genocide, the Turkish Government respond in a way described in a FCO briefing to Geoff Hoon in June 2006:

„Turkey is neuralgic and defensive about the charge of genocide despite the fact that the events occurred at the time of the Ottoman Empire as opposed to modern day Turkey. This defensiveness has meant that Turkey has historically stifled debate at home and devoted considerable diplomatic effort to dissuading any further recognition“.

The price of telling the truth ranges from political and economic sanctions abroad, such as withdrawal of ambassadors, to punishment at home varying from imprisonment to the ultimate sacrifice of murder, paid by the courageous journalist Hrant Dink.

However, refusal to acknowledge the truth prevents any healing for the Armenian people or genuine reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey. It would be healing for the Turkish people themselves for their Government to stop the systematic distortion of Turkish history. Recently, a very courageous Turkish journalist, Ahmet Altan, and a distinguished Turkish historian, Taner Akcam, have restated passionate opposition to genocide denial in Turkey. We hope they will not suffer as a result.

The British Government's position perpetuates a dishonest refusal to acknowledge a historical truth. Geoffrey Robertson QC's concluding paragraph claims:

„HMG's real and only policy has been to evade truthful answers to questions about the Armenian genocide, because the truth would discomfort the Turkish government. It can be predicted that any future question on the subject will be met with the same meaningless formula about 'insufficiently unequivocal evidence', disguising the simple fact that HMG will not now come to terms with an issue on which it was once so volubly certain, namely that the Armenian massacres were a 'crime against humanity' which should never be forgiven or forgotten. Times change, but as other civilised nations recognise, the universal crimes of genocide and torture have no statute of limitations“.

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I will briefly address the historical reality. Winston Churchill's account is compelling:

„In 1915 the Turkish government began and ruthlessly carried out the infamous general massacre and deportation of Armenians in Asia Minor ... whole districts were blotted out in one administrative holocaust ... there is no reasonable doubt that this crime was planned and executed for political reasons“.

The then US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau's personal account is devastating:

„The Central Government now announced its intention of gathering the two million or more Armenians living in the several sections of the empire and transporting them to this desolate and inhospitable region“-

the Syrian desert-

„it really represented a new method of massacre. When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact.

All through the spring and summer of 1915 the deportations took place. Scarcely a single Armenian was exempted from the order ... Before the caravans were started, it became the regular practice to separate the young men from the families, tie them together in groups of four, lead them to the outskirts, and shoot them. Public hangings without trial-the only offense being that the victims were Armenians-were taking place constantly“.

The soldiers,

„showed a particular desire to annihilate the educated and the influential ... I was constantly receiving reports“,

of Armenian men marched to a secluded valley where,

„a mob of Turkish peasants fell upon them with clubs, hammers, axes, scythes, spades and saws“.

A guard of soldiers,

„accompanied each convoy ... From thousands of Armenian cities and villages these despairing caravans now set forth; they filled all the roads leading southward ... When the caravans first started, the individuals bore some resemblance to human beings; in a few hours, however, the dust of the road plastered their faces and clothes, the mud caked their lower members, and the slowly advancing mobs, frequently bent with fatigue and crazed by the brutality of their ‘protectors’, resembled some new and strange animal species. Yet for the better part of six months, from April to October 1915, practically all the highways in Asia Minor were crowded with these unearthly bands of exiles. They could be seen winding in and out of every valley and climbing up the sides of nearly every mountain-moving on and on ... every road led to death. Village after village and town after town was evacuated of its Armenian population ... about 1,200,000 people started on this journey to the Syrian desert.

Death in its several forms-massacre, starvation, exhaustion-destroyed the larger part of the refugees. The Turkish policy was that of extermination under the guise of deportation. In one particular death march ... On the seventieth day a few creatures reached Aleppo. Out of the consigned convoy of 18,000 souls just 150 women and children reached the destination ... I have by no means told the most terrible details ... I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this“.

The evidence of state-sponsored massacres and deportations is overwhelming and incontrovertible. I am grateful that the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, will refer to the compilation of systematic and compelling evidence in the Blue Book. But in the face of all the evidence, Her Majesty’s Government’s position was summarised as recently as 4 March 2008 by the noble Lord, Lord Malloch-Brown:

„The Government acknowledge the strength of feeling about this terrible episode of history and recognise the massacres of 1915-16 as a tragedy. However, neither this Government nor

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previous Governments have judged that the evidence is sufficiently unequivocal to persuade us that these events should be categorised as genocide as defined by the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide“.-[*Official Report*, 4/3/08; cols. WA165-66.]

In June 2006, Geoff Hoon made the spurious claim that it is not possible to apply the term genocide retrospectively:

„I recognise that it is perfectly possible intellectually to try to apply the definitions of genocide from the convention to appalling tragedies that occurred, in this case, some 30 years before. The common practice in law is not to apply such judgments retrospectively“.-[Official Report, Commons, 7/6/06; col. 136 WH.]

To which Geoffrey Robertson robustly replied:

„This is nonsense. There is no ‘common practice in law’ not to apply the definitions of genocide ‘intellectually’ to tragedies that occur before the convention was ratified“.

He went on to say:

„There can be no logical or legal objection to an authoritative judgment which decides whether the events of 1915 satisfy the 1948 definition“.

I will place a copy of Geoffrey Robertson’s publication in the Library.

One of the gravest consequences of denial is a sense of impunity which extends to the present day in the forcible expulsion of all the Armenians living in Nakhichevan-I was there when some of that was happening-and the systematic destruction by Azeri Turks of priceless Armenian archaeological sacred treasures beyond count, such as ancient crosses, churches and graves, continuing the terrible trajectory of destruction of remnants of Armenian civilisation and culture. Similarly, the assaults on Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh by Azeri Turks in the 1991 Operation Ring policy was a brutal rerun of the deportations of 1915, until the Armenians in Karabakh resorted to their constitutional right to self-determination. That prompted Azerbaijan to begin full-scale military offensives and attempted ethnic cleansing, an issue for another day.

I return briefly to the desirability of recognition for the Turkish people. Many feel that, in a culture where the concepts of shame and honour carry great weight, it could be interpreted as a mark of honour for a contemporary Turkish Government to acknowledge the historic reality of the genocide carried out by a past government and for which they are not responsible. Turkey would gain respect from the international community if it became an open, civil society, allowing freedom of speech to its own people and respecting the rights of the international community to speak the truth now widely available in scholarly publications and expert legal opinions.

Non-recognition can be interpreted as a denial of a cruel reality which will exacerbate the pain for those for whom the memory of genocide is still raw: survivors, their families and communities. As I am sure the Minister does not wish to exacerbate that pain, would Her Majesty’s Government at least send a representative to attend the 95th anniversary commemoration at the Armenian genocide memorial at the Temple of Peace in Cardiff? Even if the word genocide is not used, that act would convey genuine feelings of sympathy, which would at least be some comfort for those who will be remembering the anguish of their history.

Until or unless the truth is acknowledged, it is not only that justice is denied to the Armenians but that the freedom of the so-called free world is jeopardized.

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While we have our freedom, we must use it to fight for truth to be acknowledged and for justice to be achieved for victims of untruth and genocide.

5.41 pm

Lord Avebury: My Lords, I am sure that we are all very grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, for raising not only the subject of the Armenian genocide but its treatment in modern Turkey and the lack of freedom to discuss the issue among Turkish writers, journalists and thinkers. However, in the last few years it has to be acknowledged there has been some relaxation of the total ban on discussion of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, enforced as it used to be by the constitution itself. That was buttressed by criminal sanctions, social ostracism and, in tragic cases such as that of Hrant Dink, who the noble Baroness mentioned, murder.

It was perhaps a consequence of the international furore created by the prosecution, under the notorious Article 301 of the Turkish criminal code, of Nobel Prize winning novelist Orhan Pamuk that the crime of „insulting the Turkish state“ is no longer used systematically against the few brave writers who affirm that what happened in 1915-16 was indeed a genocide. Although no statistics are available of the use of that law, it seems that other laws are being used to prosecute for thought crime, such as Article 216 of the penal code, which criminalises,

„instigating a part of the people having different social class, race, religion, sect or region to hatred or hostility against another part of the people in a way dangerous for the public security“.

There is indeed still a strong taboo on discussion of the issue, and the few dissidents like Temel Demirer or Ragip Zarakolu who speak out are harassed relentlessly. According to the report by the EU Commissioner for Enlargement to the Council last November:

„Turkish law does not sufficiently guarantee freedom of expression in line with the European Convention on Human Rights.... Political pressures on the media and legal uncertainties affect the exercise of freedom of the press in practice“.

As we saw only this month from the extreme reaction to the resolution by the US Congress Committee on Foreign Affairs, formally recognising the Armenian genocide, Ankara's efforts to suppress discussion of the facts extends overseas. When the BBC asked Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, who was on an official visit here earlier this month, about the US initiative and a similar, recent vote in the Swedish Parliament using the „G“ word, his response was to threaten to summarily deport 100,000 Armenian guest workers from Turkey-reminding the world that it was in the mass deportations of 1915, which the noble Baroness raised, that a million Armenians met their deaths. At the moment, the Turkish media are getting wound up about a supposed Bill in the UK Parliament providing for a day of remembrance for the events of 1915-16. They do not seem to have realised that Parliament is rising for the election in a few days' time.

I want to deal specifically with an attempt to bully our own Parliament into silence. There had been regular debates in both Houses about the genocide, many of them starting from the contemporary analysis of the evidence then available, which was published in the Blue Book, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16*. That compilation, sourced from

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missionaries and the consulates of states that were neutral in the war, is by no means the only original source material available today. It has been supplemented by voluminous records such as those published by the US State Department, many now in the public domain in a 700-page book published by the Gomidas Press, and by the memoirs of Americans who were in Turkey at the time, from Ambassador Morgenthau to Dr Ussher, an American physician who was running a hospital in Van at the time of the siege by the Ottomans. There is also a surprising amount of evidence from Turkish sources despite the systematic destruction of incriminating documents; for example, in Vahakn Dadrian's bibliographical analysis published by the State University of New York.

Perhaps because the Blue Book was the first summary of evidence to reach a wider audience and because of the prestige of its editor, the great historian Arnold Toynbee, the Turkish Grand National Assembly singled it out by addressing an appeal to the UK Parliament in April 2005, labelling it as a piece of fabricated wartime propaganda and asking us to repudiate it. The Speaker sent the petition to the Foreign Office, which wrote a soothing letter in reply saying that the petition had been deposited in the Commons Library. The Turkish media continued to write about the issue through the summer, and in October 2005 some of us held a meeting to discuss a proper response to the TGNA. This was drafted and, after being signed by 33 Members of both Houses-including, I think, the noble Lord, Lord Hylton-it was sent to every Member of the TGNA in January 2006. Not one of them reacted to our proposal that a meeting should be held between Turkish and UK parliamentarians, with academic advisers, to discuss the limited question of the authenticity of the documents quoted in the Blue Book.

At a conference on Turkish-Armenian relations in Istanbul in March 2006, the arch-denialist Sukru Elekdag MP acknowledged that he and his colleagues had received our letter, and said that the reason it had been ignored was that it did not come from all the Members of the UK Parliament. We have written to Mr Elekdag to renew our attempt to hold this dialogue, and the FCO has kindly agreed to deliver the letter to him in person.

In August, we emailed the 400 Members of the TGNA who are online, repeating our proposal for a meeting; but again not one of them responded. We had come up against a brick wall. Then, last summer, what seemed to be a new opportunity for starting a dialogue presented itself to us. The eminent scholar and publisher Ara Sarafian had translated the Blue Book into Turkish, and I had the honour of writing the foreword. The authorities refused to deliver the copies that we sent to every Member of the TGNA, and not one of the intended recipients came to the meeting we held in Ankara. The event was reported briefly and factually by the two main dailies, but they ignored what was said at the launch about getting together to talk about the petition.

I appeal to the Minister to help us to open up this dialogue between British and Turkish parliamentarians on the limited question of the sources for an appraisal of the events of 1915-16, starting with the Blue Book

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since they first raised the subject with us. Will the Minister facilitate our proposal to hold a meeting between interested MPs from both countries, with their academic advisers, so that in the new Parliament we can help them to open up a part of their history that has been swept

under the carpet for nearly 100 years? Will the Minister ask Mr Erdogan to join us in promoting a discussion that the TGNA itself began?

5.48 pm

Lord Hylton: My Lords, I shall make three brief points. From 1915 onwards, it is pretty clear that the Ottoman Government planned and organised deportations and massacres. This was to have been the final solution for the Armenians of Turkey, and alas, it included in its scope—whether intentionally or not—a good number of Assyrian Christians from those parts. The evidence is compelling. Perhaps the most telling point is that it was the Austrian and German consuls in the region who spoke out, even though their countries were allies of the Government of Turkey. If Turkey would now acknowledge its history and apologise, if possible, for the dying acts of the pre-republican Government, honour might be satisfied. That should be preceded—as the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, mentioned—or followed by an end to the prosecution and persecution of historians and writers trying to present the truth from within Turkey.

I conclude by suggesting that the current clamour for attaching the particular label „genocide“ to the terrible events that took place is misplaced. It certainly annoys Turks and their Government, and encourages, if anything, the continuance of denial of what happened. It has already harmed the détente that was beginning between Turkey and Armenia, and as has again been mentioned, it has caused threats by Turkey to deport a large number of Armenian workers. It has also diverted attention from the urgent constitutional reforms that many Europeans and others consider necessary within Turkey and has thus hindered Turkey’s application for EU membership.

Lord Tunnicliffe: My Lords, a number of noble Lords have indicated that they wish to speak in the gap. I remind them that this is a time-limited debate and that the time that they use in the gap, of which there is little, will come out of the closing speeches.

5.51 pm

Lord Maginnis of Drumglass: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in the gap. I apologise for having failed to realise that the debate was taking place until now.

I want to contribute because I feel that it is inappropriate to dwell on events of a century ago while the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains unresolved. Currently nearly 1 million Azerbaijanis have refugee status after being denied the right to return to their homes. It is a humanitarian disaster carried out by the Armenians. I would have thought that that would be more relevant instead of self-indulgence about something that happened 100 years ago in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire. I would never suggest that there is a reason or an excuse for multiple

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deaths and killings on one side or the other, but from my reading, I believe that there was an organised Armenian-Russian attempt in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire, which provoked conflict, and in that conflict equal or comparable numbers of people were killed in pretty harsh circumstances.

In the short time available to me, I suggest that the United Kingdom should remember that in 1922 Kemal Ataturk turned Turkey around. It became our ally. It has been our ally for almost 90 years. During the days of the Warsaw pact and the NATO stand-off, we required, and were grateful for, Turkish participation in guarding the freedom of Europe. For that reason, I believe that like the American congressional committee we should be very careful not to alienate further our Turkish friends. I draw attention to the fact that the American congressional committee voted by a majority of only one in favour of such a resolution. My time is up, but I am grateful, thank you.

5.54 pm

Lord Kilclooney: My Lords, I, too, will be brief. The history of Europe, and, indeed the world at the moment, is a conflict between Muslims and Christians in many different countries, the most recent example being the slaughter of several hundred Christians in Nigeria. Armenia is a Christian country, and Turkey is a Muslim country. My sympathy would therefore go towards Armenia, because I am a practising Christian. My daughter, through Tear Fund, has done voluntary work there for many months, assisting the people since their freedom from the Soviet Union.

However, as has been said, this is something from 100 years ago. To bring it all up now and clamour-to use the well chosen word of the noble Lord, Lord Hylton-to have it qualified as genocide is unhelpful to the situation between Turkey and Armenia. Of course, there is also the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, where there have been more recent murders of hundreds of people by the Armenians, supported by other countries. Hundreds were killed and nearly a million Azeris had to flee, so Armenia does not have clean hands.

It is a bit like Cyprus, or Palestine and Israel or, dare I say it, even Ireland: there are arguments in favour of both sides. The best way forward is for the two countries involved to negotiate. I do not see why we in the United Kingdom should think that we, plus the Turks, can solve the problem by holding talks in Ankara, and so on. It is really a matter for Turkey and Armenia to get together to resolve, knowing that hundreds of thousands died on both sides-the Turkish side and the Armenian side.

At the moment, we have some movement. The President of Turkey took the initiative and went to a soccer match in Armenia. That brought about a meeting between the Governments of Armenia and Turkey to try to create movement on the subject. A sub-commission has been set up involving not only Turkey and Armenia but Switzerland and several other countries to try to search out the facts, quietly and diplomatically, not trying to raise the temperature-which this kind of resolution does. We see what happened in America and Sweden. I therefore suggest that it would be better not to support the Motion.

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5.57 pm

Lord Wallace of Saltaire: My Lords, much has been said on both sides. As often, as a foreign policy spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, I find myself standing in the middle. In

the past few weeks, I have found myself disappointing Turkish Cypriots who wanted me to give absolute and unconditional support to the Turkish Cypriot view of the Cyprus conflict, as I had previously disappointed Greek Cypriots who wanted me to give absolute and unconditional support to their view of the Cyprus conflict. Similarly, I have found myself between Tamil lobbies and the Sri Lankan High Commission, and between traditional supporters of the current Israeli Government and people who feel that we should be deeply committed to the Hamas view of the Palestinian community. Indeed, I have just returned from a conference in Brussels where, this time last year, I criticised the Israeli Government's intervention in Gaza and was accused bluntly by one of Mr Netanyahu's closest advisers of being an anti-Semite for daring to raise the subject.

We know that passions go very high in this area, and we need to tread carefully. I echo what the noble Lord said: we also need to tread carefully to ensure that we do not always support Christians against Muslims or against Hindus. We must recognise that there have been many historical wrongs. It is not just the Turks and the Armenians who do not have clean hands: if one looks back 90 or 100 years, the British Government's hands were not particularly clean. The responsibility for the Bengal famine during World War II, in which an extraordinarily large number of Bengalis died, was clearly that of our fathers and grandfathers. I was reading about the British Army retaking Delhi after the Indian mutiny, during which we massacred the entire Muslim population. We have not been wonderfully civilised in the past.

We all recognise that the fate of the Armenians during World War I was a tragedy. A huge number were killed or forced to leave their villages. Much of the legacy of Armenian civilisation was lost. I also recognise—because I have been reading about the history of the Caucasus in recent months, as the north Caucasus becomes less and less stable—that this was one further event in the decline of the Ottoman and Tsarist Empires. As I got to know Turkey better in recent years, I discovered that many of the current population of Turkey are the great-grandchildren of people who were expelled from south-east Europe or from the Tsarist Empire. For example, in 1870, the Circassians, who are actively supporting from the outside the revolt in the north Caucasus and the very sad events that are happening there, were offered the choice of expulsion, conversion or death by the Tsar during the final conquest of the northern Caucasus. Sadly, many of them remember it. When one goes to Turkey, one finds oneself arguing with people whose great-grandparents were themselves the victims of expulsion and worse in other parts of the world.

Undoubtedly, there were massacres of Armenians in World War I. There were also massacres of Greeks as the Turkish army, under Kemal Ataturk, managed to expel the Greeks from Smyrna. Had the Greeks

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won the battle of Smyrna, there would have been massacres of Turks instead. Sadly, that was the nature of the debate.

Now we have the least bad Turkish Government that we have had in my lifetime. I have found myself debating with members of the AK Party on several occasions in recent weeks. This is a Government that is attempting to modernise Turkey, and which is also attempting to open up to Armenia and to its Kurdish minority. It finds itself coming up against-

Viscount Waverley: Perhaps I might ask the noble Lord whether he remembers that Turkey has made an accord with Armenia, with a view to friendship. Perhaps the noble Lord would like to say a word on that, if he has the time.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire: I am well aware of what is under way. I am also aware of the pressure that the Turkish Government are coming under from what one has to call the deep state within Turkey—the secularists, the judiciary and the army—and the problems that leaves for them in managing to make progress in reconciling with the Kurds and the Armenians as they try to move forward. One has to remember that many of those who conducted the massacre of Armenians were Kurds: there are very delicate memories here.

I support what the Turkish Government are doing. I recognise that they find themselves caught between Azerbaijan and Armenia as they attempt to move forward, and I recognise that that means that Nagorno-Karabakh must be dealt with as part of the package. Both sides committed a number of very unfortunate acts during the chaos of 1990-92 in the south Caucasus—as they did in Georgia. If we are to sort out Nagorno-Karabakh as a compromise between Azerbaijan and Armenia, concessions must be made by both sides.

We should now encourage the opening that is under way and the hesitant steps that the Turkish Government are making towards a more open and civilised society. I wish that they were moving faster, but I recognise the obstacles that they face within Turkey—particularly within the Turkish state. We should encourage the Armenian Government, the Azeri Government and the Turkish Government to come to more open and friendly relations.

6.05 pm

Baroness Rawlings: My Lords, it is always a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, especially on historical debates. The Hamidian policies which were enacted and the massacres which were repeated in 1895-96, 1909, 1915-18 and 1920-22 formed a truly horrendous period in Armenian history. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, for initiating this Question today.

As we know, the Ottoman Empire massacred up to 1.5 million people in 1915 alone. The Armenian population was annihilated in the most cruel and barbaric way. The events were an appalling crime against humanity and a terrible tragedy for the Armenian people, and they can never be forgotten. We must learn from the past, move forward and do all that is in our power to help and support Turkey and Armenia to move forward so that they have a better chance of a better future.

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Turkey and Armenia have initiated a diplomatic protocol between them, for the first time in their history, which promises to establish and develop better relations between the two and to formalise an official investigation into the past. This is a constructive step. However, the process has stalled, despite pressure from the US and EU, amid mutual accusations by Turkey and Armenia of attempts to modify the deal. Neither Parliament has yet approved the protocols. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan has said that the Armenian Parliament will

ratify the deal as soon as Turkey does, but he has also threatened to walk away from the protocols if the Turks fail to honour them,

„within the shortest period of time“.

Does the Minister agree that it would be a catastrophe if the progress made so far by both countries were to stall? What are the Government doing to support these countries and persuade them to work together, and to persuade both Parliaments to co-operate and ratify the deal as soon as possible? In light of the pressure that has already been applied, to date with limited success, what new plans have the Government drawn up to help with this issue?

Relations have also been soured this month by Tayyip Erdogan's threat to deport thousands of Armenian migrants working illegally in Turkey. What is the Government's assessment of this situation and how are they helping to calm tensions over this matter? Can the Minister tell the Committee what discussions have taken place with Turkey and Armenia's neighbours to make them aware of the importance of their role and support in easing friction between the two countries?

It is widely accepted that the prospect of European Union membership is helping to drive reform within Turkey, and that this process of change is a constructive way for it to examine its past in this area. The criteria for EU membership demand that a country should be, in effect, a liberal democracy subject to the rule of law. We on these Benches believe that the process of change in society and politics which the criteria for EU membership involve is the best context for Turkey to examine the Ottoman Empire's past in this area. What discussions are Her Majesty's Government having with representatives of the EU and Turkey to help the country meet these criteria and progress to its accession to the EU?

For us and the outside world to label such events, and pass judgments, changes very little. The best way to arrive at the historical truth and to reconcile the descendants of perpetrators and victims is for there to be a free and open historical debate. I urge the Government to do all they can to assist and support both parties in this process.

6.10 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead): I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, for initiating this debate and for her assiduous pursuit of challenging issues such as this one. I also thank noble Lords who have participated so ably in this debate.

At the outset, I reaffirm that the Government deeply regret the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians who were either killed by Ottoman troops or died

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from starvation or disease at the beginning of the previous century. We share the view expressed today that the victims of such suffering should not be forgotten. The fate of ethnic Armenians and smaller Christian minorities, including the Assyrians, living in the Ottoman Empire at the time was roundly and robustly condemned by the British Government.

I confirm that the position of the Government is to continue to work for rapprochement and reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia. In October 2009, two protocols were signed by

the Foreign Ministers of both countries, agreeing a framework for the normalisation of relations and the opening of borders. This represents a landmark step in progressing better relations between the two countries. Signing the protocols-a number of noble Lords alluded to this-was not an easy step for either country, and ratification will remain sensitive. The UK Government will not make any statements that have the potential to jeopardise this process.

It is apparent that there is a strong political will, and indeed popular support, for improving relations. The Armenian president and the Turkish president have been focused and engaged in the process, which also allows for the creation of a sub-committee to examine historical issues, including the events of 1915-17.

I shall now answer some of the questions that noble Lords asked. I say to the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, that Geoffrey Robertson concluded that while the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide could not be applied retrospectively, the term „genocide“ should be applied to the Armenian massacres. „Genocide“ is a precise term and its use is best assessed by a competent court. However, then as now, there is no court with the authority to make such an assessment. Therefore, it is inappropriate for the British Government to apply the term to events on which no legal judgment can be made.

I was aware last year that noble Lords had raised the issue of a memorial. Sending a government representative might suggest recognition, so, despite our sympathies for the tragedy, we do not intend to send a representative. The Government reject any suggestion that Parliament has been misled, but I will also make it perfectly clear that Ministers, not officials, are responsible for the statements that they make to Parliament.

The noble Baroness, Lady Cox, referred to recent resolutions and decisions in the US Congress and the Swedish Riksdag. Those have not changed the UK Government’s view that it is for the Turkish and Armenian people to address the issue together. Neither the US nor the Swedish Government has changed its position as a result of these votes.

The noble Lord, Lord Avebury, referred to the Blue Book, with which he has a long association. As he pointed out, it contains many compelling reports of eye-witness accounts of the events in question. It should be considered alongside other documents relating to the events of 1915-16 in archives around the world. Our embassy in Ankara can certainly assist in passing on a letter from UK parliamentarians to their Turkish counterparts inviting dialogue over the validity of the Blue Book. I understand that officials have already been in touch with the noble Lord to take this forward.

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It remains our view, with regard to those events, that the greatest need is for dialogue between Turks and Armenians. However, on the issue of parliamentarians, in which the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, has been extremely engaged, we can do only so much to encourage Turkish parliamentarians to engage on the issue. I fear that, to date, their response to the idea of a conference has been somewhat negative, but of course any progress on such a front would be very welcome and would represent more of the reconciliation which we all want.

The noble Lord, Lord Hylton, and other noble Lords raised the issue of deportations. Prime Minister Erdogan and the Foreign Minister have now clarified that there is no immediate plan

to deport illegal Armenian immigrants from Turkey. President Gül has also clarified that Turkey does not discriminate against Armenians working in Turkey. Subsequent comments by Turkish politicians have underlined the tolerance shown by Turkey towards migrants. I repeat that it is for the Turkish Government to manage migration issues and illegal immigration in line with their international obligations and Turkish law.

On EU membership, which several noble Lords raised, the issue that we are discussing today is not a precondition for Turkish membership of the European Union. However, under the political criteria for membership, Turkey is expected to maintain what is called in the criteria „good neighbourly relations“ with countries in the region, which of course include Armenia.

The issue of Nagorno-Karabakh was raised by noble Lord, Lord Maginnis, and others. The Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan have had useful and constructive meetings in the framework of the Minsk group process, including, most recently, at the end of January. We hope for continuing progress. On the issue of our contacts, my honourable friend Chris Bryant, Minister for Europe, discussed Turkey-Armenia relations with his Turkish counterpart during the Turkish Prime Minister's recent visit, and he lobbied his counterpart in January and February this year to encourage progress on the normalisation of relations with Armenia.

The noble Baroness, Lady Rawlings, raised a number of points. I may not get round to them all, but if there is anything that I have not covered in my response, she may expect me to give her a written answer as soon as possible. Politically, the UK Government continue to urge both the Armenian and Turkish Governments to move forward with the normalisation process and to find ways to reconcile their differences. The Foreign Secretary recently raised the issue with the Armenian President, we have had many discussions with foreign ministers and others and, in-country, our ambassadors are engaging on the issues.

We have supported a number of projects designed to promote conflict resolution and break down the stereotypes that clearly exist. These have included sponsoring a Turkish film festival in Yerevan and a touring theatre production about the conflict. and bringing together young people from both countries-women, journalists and others, but especially women activists from both countries-to talk about the prospects for EU integration and working together to ensure that both countries have open contacts and discussions.

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The noble Baroness, Lady Rawlings, also mentioned the EU. The European Union remains fully involved in helping Turkey and Armenia to improve relations. Commissioner Füle, who is responsible for enlargement and neighbourhood, will visit the south Caucasus in April, and High Representative Ashton is planning a visit in the next few months. The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, is following the Turkey-Armenia normalisation process closely and using his contacts with both parties to encourage more progress. The EU continues to make it clear that it is ready to provide practical support, should that be needed, to further the implementation of the protocols once they are ratified.

The 2009 EU accession report for Turkey shows that it is not meeting the conditions for joining the EU, in particular in relation to neighbourly relations with countries such as

Armenia. That question was raised by noble Lords. The accession progress report recognises the significant progress that Turkey has made in normalising relations with Armenia. It has made efforts to improve relations with neighbours, although we recognise that there is still some way to go.

I thank noble Lords for this debate-in particular the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, who has made a great contribution on these issues. We must all work together to ensure that we see the progress that will be essential to bring consensus and closure to the tragic history that the two countries are grappling with. I hope that noble Lords, who have great interest and commitment, can assist with that.

The Deputy Chairman of Committees (Baroness Pitkeathley): The Committee will adjourn until 6.30 pm.

6.21 pm

Sitting suspended.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200910/ldhansrd/text/100329-gc0004.htm>

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