

PRESS RELEASE

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia

Contact: Information Desk Tel: (+374-1) 52-35-31

Email: info@armeniaForeignMinistry.com

Web: <http://www.ArmeniaForeignMinistry.am>

SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY VARTAN OSKANIAN MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), Istanbul, 26 June 2002

First in the spirit of regional solidarity, let me congratulate Turkey in its football triumphs. There are some victories that we can all applaud and delight in.

Let me express my appreciation for the opportunity extended to me by TESEV to address this group. Anyone interested in the significance of political debate, in Turkey, as it faces important choices and tough challenges, cannot but recognize TESEV's role in the maintenance of a consistently high quality of discourse and the effort to be comprehensive and open to a wide range of ideas and positions.

I am sure you will all understand if I tell you that Armenia is quite interested in the substance of political debate in Turkey. After all, for the last half millennium, the destinies and the lives of our countries and our peoples have been intertwined. Not easily, not always for the best, but given that history and geography have thrown us together, we are neighbors.

We are not the only neighbors in the world who have had, and who continue to have, a troubled relationship. Troubled memories, a tortured past, recriminations, unsettled accounts and the enduring wounds of victimhood, plague the national consciousness of peoples on many borders. In our case, some distance between our two countries might have allowed us to put distance between our past and our future. But we have no such luxury. There is no space, no cushion, between us.

As we left Yerevan Monday morning, we could see Mount Ararat ever so clearly, both from

the ground and from the air. We could almost reach out and touch it -- almost. Ararat and Turkey are only 45 miles from my own Ministry. But we can not go there. As such, Ararat symbolizes both our pride and our frustration. It is a constant reminder of Turkish-Armenian ties, relations and history. They are all there in that mountain.

We know that evil ghosts on the Franco-German border were exorcised with the construction of the European Union.

But we also know that elsewhere, as in the Balkans, the last 10 years have seen the convulsions of settling the unsettled scores of centuries of accumulated resentment, domination and repression. To redress their deep-rooted antagonism, new structures, new frameworks are emerging, with the help of the hard-won experiences and the models of Western Europe. Tolerance, mutual respect, the admission of past excesses as well as the security of each entity and cooperative interdependent economies all contribute to implementing alternatives to interminable feuding.

It should not surprise anyone if we suggest that we in the South Caucasus should look carefully at such efforts to take solid steps to seriously address the challenges borne of historically rooted conflicts, centenary in their origins, embedded in the collective memories of peoples. Nor can these conflicts be simply resolved or cosmetically reformulated by those who believe that the past is an irrelevancy. History is as much the foundation of a neighborhood as geography, a common landscape of plateaus, majestic mountains or shared river basins.

In this neighborhood, Turkey is Armenia's neighbor, just as Armenia is Turkey's. This fact can be self-servingly ignored, manipulated, marginalized or resisted. But it cannot be denied or changed, except with bloodshed and further conflict.

I am sure you, too, remember the wisdom of your grandparents. My grandmother -- from Marash -- used to say that neighbors are more important than even family, and those relations must be nurtured. It is no different for states. No matter what else, we must talk to each other, deal with each other, visit each other, trade with each other, and do so within the framework of our own sovereign equal identities. This is true for each and all of our neighbors. It is not for Armenia to judge Turkey's friendship with Azerbaijan. Shared ethnic, cultural, linguistic, economic or even strategic interests are understandable.

But that is no reason to isolate others or hold captive one set of interactions for the benefit of a third party. We do not hold Turkey's moral, political, economic -- even military -- assis-

tance to Azerbaijan against it. We may not always like that closeness, or appreciate its implications for our own security.

Nevertheless, we are ready for dialogue, for diplomatic relations, for open formal sovereign communications, without which regional imbalances, instability and even hostilities cannot be righted, mitigated, and anchored in reciprocal understanding.

Where there are no open channels or constant dialogue and exchange, old ghosts will keep rattling in everybody's closets. To wait for them to go away before beginning dialogue and exchange means waiting forever. It means that - perhaps we do not want them to go away. If indeed we do, then the demons which are poisoning our air must be attacked together, their legacy must be transcended together. They relate to all of us, and they will only disappear when we tackle the abyss of experience and memory which separates us.

To do this, Armenia advocates full diplomatic relations with Turkey without preconditions. This does not mean Armenia is willing to renounce its national memories nor dismiss the historical injustices it has suffered. We notice with satisfaction that in Turkey there has been a movement away from a monolithic, undifferentiated rigid approach concerning the Genocide to a more pluralistic and varied debate. This debate within Turkey may have not moved forward official policy, but Armenia is gratified to see this debate occur, where the subject is no longer taboo.

After all, memory does not heal by denial. The truthful assuming of responsibility is a precondition for the rebuilding of trust. Open relations between our two countries can further contribute to the slow but steady improvement of mutual confidence.

Ironically -- and being the huge optimist that I am, I would say fortunately -- your resistance to open relations with Armenia is not based on the existence of our shared historic problems. Rather, relations between Turkey and Armenia are being held hostage to Armenia's own conflicts and tensions with Azerbaijan.

Quite honestly, Armenian and Azerbaijani relations, too, are being held hostage to Azerbaijan's own reluctance to recognize incontrovertible facts on the ground, its tendency to confuse stubbornness for principles, its desire to build policy on myths and fables, and its denial of the reality that a future must be built on a real past and a viable present.

Let's look at those realities: Nagorno Karabagh has never been part of an independent Azer-

baijan either before Soviet rule, or since the fall of the Soviet empire. Except for the Soviet period, Nagorno Karabagh had never been under Azerbaijani control. The men, women and children of Nagorno Karabagh seceded from Soviet Azerbaijan legally in accordance with the constitutional framework of the very Soviet Union which had incorporated Nagorno Karabagh into Azerbaijan, admittedly arbitrarily, in 1923. During the Soviet years, its population was oppressed, their rights systematically denied. Hence, they repeatedly sought redress. Since its legal separation more than a dozen years ago, a whole generation has grown up in Nagorno Karabagh, free of Azerbaijani control.

The world has acknowledged that the Soviet era has ended. Let us then not consent to continuing to define our regional relations and determining our people's futures based on conditions created by a Stalin long dead. His empire is dismembered, his construction of arbitrary political and ethnic borders is collapsed, his control has long ended, and we do not have to be saddled with implementing his unrealistic, unjust vision. Armenians, Turks and Azeris together can transcend what history has wrought to reach a peace and prosperity that our peoples deserve and that reflect their own free choices.

Or, we can keep coming up against a lack of flexibility, a lack of courage to accommodate change and to try new solutions, and a lack of genuine vision in order to embrace the change.

Azerbaijan has succeeded in convincing Turkey that blockading Armenia will diminish Armenia's economic capacity, undermine its self-reliance and force Armenia to negotiate from a weaker position and hence compel it to consider concessions it would not otherwise be willing to make in the conflict over Nagorno Karabagh.

Turkey's and Azerbaijan's continued closures of the borders with Armenia are based on the demonstrably false premise that Armenia's weak and collapsing economy will force it to accept any solution imposed by friend and foe alike. Perhaps, Azerbaijan, for a variety of reasons, including domestic consumption, world public opinion, and the need to justify clinging to a politics that so far have been ineffectual, needs to create and perpetuate the myth of Armenia's utter vulnerability, and its being on the verge of economic collapse. Others who are not in that situation and who could think otherwise, based on their own national self-interest, do not have to buy into that mythology and do not have to invest in politics and strategies based on false assessments.

Armenia and its economy are not collapsing and its rank in the Human Development Index is

ahead of some unexpected rivals. On the Index of Open Economies, too Armenia, in 45th place is way ahead of our neighbors in the region. Last year, our GNP grew 9.6 %; in the first half of this year we've achieved 10 percent, and hope to finish the year at that rate of growth. Our macroeconomic indicators have been consistently promising. As you can see, fables are born when things cannot be said accurately.

Of course, while we have a way to go to fully fulfill our potential, it is evident that we are not as fragile as some would wish us to be. On the contrary. Certain hardships can harden the resolve of people who are unfairly besieged. And we are no exception. It is not too soon for our neighbors to realize that the last decade's politics of pressure, discrimination and blockades have not achieved their intended goals. Instead, they may have added to our determination to solidify and strengthen relations with those of our neighbors who value our friendship and share with us common interests both bilaterally and in the region.

They have had another effect as well. They have done nothing to soothe the sense of suspicion and resentment. If Turkey is going to live up to its role as regional leader, and is committed to being a fair, effective and positive actor in the stabilization and peace of the South Caucasus, it cannot pursue a policy of explicit, unabashed partiality, a politics of exclusion and one-sidedness, of insulating Armenia, or surrounding it with military and economic alliances that look like they intend to contain and strangle.

It is worth for a moment to remember that Armenia does not have the capacity to damage, contain or strangle Turkey. Indeed, this fear can, realistically, only be one-sided. And provocations by one's neighbor can feed such fears.

When alliances and assistance can leap borders, it is more and more difficult to successfully carry out unilateral, partial policies. Today, both Armenia and Turkey see their future in Europe. This gives us one more reason to cooperate, to seriously implement the reforms that are as important to us as they are to a watchful Europe. TESEV's invitation to change mentalities, to embrace change and to see the world in a way that recognizes the primacy of the individual human being substituting to the mechanical impulses of domineering realpolitik and intrusive statism is a welcome corrective. Accepting the full implications of a change in mindsets, which is both cause and effect, is a step in the right direction for all of us. We welcome the challenge and the opportunity of dealing with a historic neighbor whose europeanization is in our common interest.

Indeed, TESEV's general focus on the need for active cooperation between the governments and the peoples of the region for the region's future peace and prosperity is very much in line with Armenia's thinking. The riches of the region, both in terms of natural and human resources, as you say, are indeed important assets for the welfare, solidarity, and cooperation of the region's people. However, we call on you to consider that waiting for the problems to be resolved before such cooperation begins means no cooperation at all. Today, Turkey and Armenia have a chance to base their future in this region on peace, on future stability, on economic and social parity, and mutual understanding.

The opportunities are ours to seize and the benefits are ours to reap.