

Topical debate briefing – Armenian Massacres 1915-1916:

Public Lines

Terrible suffering was inflicted on Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th Century. We must ensure that the victims of that suffering are not forgotten. The British Government's main concern is how we can ensure that the lessons are learned and relationships are rebuilt to ensure a peaceful and secure future for everyone living in the region.

For this reason, we believe that it is first and foremost for the Turkish and Armenian people to address their common history. We welcome the recent signature of protocols on establishing and developing relations between Turkey and Armenia as an important step in this direction. In particular we welcome that the protocols provide for an inter-governmental subcommittee to examine historical issues. It is important that this process is owned directly by the parties involved.

(If pressed) We do not think it is appropriate for the UK government to adopt the legal term 'genocide' to describe the events of 1915-16.

Background

HMG has consistently stated that events in Ottoman Turkey in 1915-16 were tragic, they were condemned by the government of the day and we continue to endorse that view.

Turkey and Armenia have recently taken significant steps towards normalising their relations. Two protocols were signed on 10 October setting out the basis for establishing diplomatic relations and developing their bilateral relationship. The protocols still need to be ratified by both parliaments but include setting up a joint inter-governmental commission to take forward a range of issues. A sub-commission is tasked with examining historical issues (albeit without an explicit reference to the genocide claims). It is important that any truth and reconciliation process be owned by the parties directly involved. It would be unhelpful if we were to change our position on the events of 1915-16 at this stage or to attempt to pre-empt or force the outcome of the reconciliation process.

We endeavour to restrict our use of the term 'genocide' to events which occurred after the adoption of the UN convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948.

In October 2009, Geoffrey Robertson QC published an opinion titled "Was there an Armenian Genocide?" In the He concluded that the events of 1915-16 do amount to genocide. Further, he states "[FCO] advice reflects neither the law on genocide nor the demonstrable facts of the massacres in 1915-16, and has been calculated to mislead parliament into believing that there has been an assessment of evidence and an exercise of judgement on that evidence." We do not agree with Geoffrey Robertson's assessment. We do not believe that the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide can be applied retrospectively to events which took place in Ottoman Turkey in 1915-16. Nor do we accept that there has been an attempt to mislead Parliament by ministers answering questions on UK government policy with regard to these events.

Answers to potential supplementary questions

Will HMG recognise the Armenian “genocide”?

Terrible suffering was inflicted on Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th Century. We must ensure that the victims of that suffering are not forgotten. However we believe that it is first and foremost for the Turkish and Armenian people to address their common history. We would encourage any process which helps them do so in an open, honest and constructive manner.

(If further pressed) Our position is unchanged. We acknowledge the strength of feeling about this terrible episode of history and recognise the massacres and crimes of 1915-16 as a tragedy. We would encourage both Armenia and Turkey to build on recent progress to address these issues together.

What do you say to the allegations that you are refusing to acknowledge a genocide because this would affect the anglo-Turkish relationship?

We don't accept this allegation. Turkey and Armenia have begun to re-establish a relationship and for the first time have the possibility to address their shared past. We would encourage any process which helps them do so in an open, honest and constructive manner.

Is recognition of the events as genocide or opening the border a pre-condition for Turkey's membership of the EU?

No. However, under the political criteria for membership Turkey is expected to maintain 'good neighbourly relations' with countries in the region.

Line to take on the publication of Geoffrey Robertson's opinion “Was there an Armenian genocide?”

Mr Robertson's opinion has been noted by FCO Ministers, who do not agree with his allegations that officials have misled Ministers nor that Ministers have, in turn, misled Parliament or the British public.

Have Ministers misled Parliament?

We do not agree with Mr Robertson's suggestion that Ministers have misled Parliament.

Have UK officials misled Parliament?

Ministers are responsible for the statements they make to Parliament.