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South Caucasus Team
Date: 09/11/200910
cc: See end of brief

To:	Minister for Europe	
	Baroness Kinnock	

Steering brief: House of Lords debate: 29 March 2010 17.30 - Recognition as genocide of the events in Armenia (Baroness Cox)

Baroness Cox will open the following Question for Short Debate on Monday 29 March:

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.

Recent events

On 4 March a resolution recognising the Armenian Genocide was passed by the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs. The resolution was opposed by the US government. On 11 March the Swedish parliament voted to recognise the Armenian Genocide by 131 – 130. The Swedish government has made clear it does not feel the vote was appropriate and that it does not intend to change official Swedish policy. Despite this, Turkey recalled its Ambassadors to both countries (though the Swedish has now returned) and cancelled a planned March visit to Stockholm by President Erdoğan.

On 16 March in an interview with the BBC Turkish service in London about the recent resolutions in the US and Sweden, the Turkish Prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, suggested Turkey could expel up to 100,000 illegal Armenian migrants if genocide recognition efforts continued. This sparked considerable press in Armenia and Turkey as well as UK press coverage. Both PM Erdogan and Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu have now clarified that there are no immediate plans to deport illegal Armenian immigrants from Turkey, and President Gul has also clarified that Turkey does not discriminate against Armenians working in Turkey.

Key Messages

We do not think it is appropriate for the UK Government to use the term genocide in relation to the deaths of up to 1.5 million ethnic Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during the First World War (between 1915-17).

The British Government recognises that terrible suffering was inflicted on Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century and we must ensure that the victims of that suffering are not forgotten. However, we believe that it is not

appropriate to apply the term genocide to events that predate the 1948 Convention on Genocide and where no legal judgement can be made.

The main concern of this Government 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. In this respect, we welcomed the signature of protocols on 10 October 2009 aimed at establishing and developing relations between Turkey and Armenia. In particular, we welcome the fact that the protocols provide for a subcommittee to examine historical issues. We believe that it is first and foremost for the Turkish and Armenian peoples to address their common history. We continue to urge both the Turkish and Armenian governments to move forward with the ratification of these protocols. Normalisation of relations offers significant benefits for both countries, despite the challenges involved. A change in the UK government position at this time would not be helpful.

Bear Traps

In October 2009 the Armenian Centre instructed Geoffrey Robertson QC to review the advice given by FCO officials to ministers on events in Ottoman Turkey in 1915-16. Geoffrey Robertson QC published an opinion titled "Was there an Armenian Genocide?" 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 it is appropriate to apply the term to events that predate the Convention and where no legal judgement can be made. Nor do we accept that there has been an attempt to mislead Parliament in the way ministers have answered questions on UK government policy with regard to these events.

Previous Parliamentary interest

Andrew Dismore MP (Labour) has presented a private members bill (PMB) which seeks to introduce a national day to remember and learn about the Armenian genocide. A Second Reading is scheduled for 30 April 2010. However, the upcoming general election means parliament may have dissolved by then and there is certainly no prospect of the Bill completing the legislative process. The government does not support the bill.

Early Day Motion (EDM) 357, calling on the UK government to recognise the Armenian massacres as genocide was tabled by Bob Spink MP (Independent) on 29 November 2006. To date it has 182 signatures, including the current Minister for Europe, Chris Bryant. The Minister's signature predates his appointment to his

current job and he has made clear that he supports the current government position.

In 2005 Baroness Cox previously asked the Government if they would recognise the Armenian Massacres as Genocide. She has made a number of public statements calling on the UK government to change its position, she is a staunch supporter of the Armenian lobby and a regular visitor to Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh.

Other countries

There is a strong Armenian diaspora lobby to persuade governments around the world to adopt the term genocide when talking about the events of 1915 – 1917. The strongest Armenian lobbies are in the US, France, and Russia.

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cc: Michael Davenport, RuSSCAD
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