

# A Genocide, a Turkish apology and an Armenian thank you

By Dr Armen Gakavian

Published in Garoon Monthly, Sydney, March 2009

In December 2008, a group of Turkish intellectuals published the following apology:

“My conscience does not accept the insensitivity shown to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe [Medz Yeghern] that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.”

This brave and moving statement was posted at <http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com>, and the accompanying petition has now been signed by over 30,000 Turks around the world. Some Armenians have criticized this apology as inadequate because it does not mention the word “Genocide”. Others see it as a way for Turkey to wriggle its way out of a full state apology and compensation. I understand the concerns but am more interested in the opportunities. This Turkish apology is an important step in the right direction, and has put yet another dent in the Turkish “wall of silence”. And I personally know of many Turks who have signed the petition because they cannot stand by and let injustice continue.

In response to this Turkish apology I, the grandchild of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, wanted to acknowledge the hand that was being extended by Turks of good conscience, and reply with gratitude. I also wanted to take the opportunity to remind the reader of the need for a Turkish state acknowledgment. I therefore prepared a draft response for discussion among my Armenian friends and colleagues, with the hope that it might turn into an Armenian petition.

A Turkish newspaper, Radikal Daily, found out about this initiative and I agreed to an online interview. In my interview, I warmly welcomed the Turkish initiative. I also emphasised that the apology is only the beginning, and that there needs to be a Turkish *state* apology, followed by corrective action. I wrote:

*“The sincerity of a Turkish state apology will be measured by what steps are then taken to reverse, as much as possible, the consequences of the crime committed.”*

My interview was published in full on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2009. Unfortunately, the editor’s introduction and accompanying column gave the impression that my draft reply to the Turkish apology was the work of an organized group of Armenians, and that an Armenian “counter-apology” was soon to be released. Both claims were incorrect, the result of a misunderstanding. Other Turkish and Armenian newspapers then reported me as saying that the Armenians should apologise to the Turks; however I never stated such a thing.

What I *did* state in the interview was my personal view that all terrorist acts and other killings (apart from acts of self-defense) committed were morally unjustifiable and therefore regrettable, and that this principle also applies to Armenians. My view on this is in line with universal Christian teaching and modern international law.

However, I also made it clear that any Armenian acts of violence “cannot compare to the attempted annihilation of an entire nation”, adding that:

*“If I were the Turkish state, I would see an apology as an excellent way of restoring the dignity lost through decades of denial.”*

Emails I have received from a number of Turks who read my interview indicate that my overall message – welcoming the Turkish apology and calling for Turkish state acknowledgement – was not lost on those

whose “conscience does not accept the insensitivity shown to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915.”

There are a growing number of Turks who want to deal with their nation’s dark past – a past that has engulfed both the Armenian and Turkish nations in its tragic fury. These Turks form a small, young, fragile but rapidly growing movement. We need to reach out to these Turks, and walk together with them on the path of truth. But we cannot do so from behind the wall of self-protection, defensiveness, prejudice and hatred.

Since the murder of Hrant Dink, I have had the privilege of meeting several Turkish students and graduates in Sydney. I consider some of them my good friends. We have spent many hours discussing the Genocide and other terrible events of the past, the ongoing denial of those events by the Turkish government, and how we can create a just and peaceful future. And, in May 2008, I had the privilege of speaking to a classroom of over 30 Turkish university students and academics in Istanbul about Armenian-Turkish relations and the Armenian Genocide.

We are at a crucial moment in the history of Armenian-Turkish relations. More than ever, it is important for the two nations to engage with each other at *both* the political and grassroots level. We must continue the twin struggle for recognition and reconciliation. We cannot have one without the other. Everyone – governments, political parties, community groups, religious groups and individuals – must get involved.

“My conscience refuses” ... to stand by and watch, when so many Turks are asking the hard questions and making brave choices. They are risking their lives and deserve our support.