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DEAN, NEW JERSEY DELEGATION

One hundred years later

Armenian Genocide Deniers Persist

Brookdale College Armenian Genocide Information Exhibit

By Rep. Chris Smith
April 12, 2015

Ms. Daniels, Mr. Dorman and Dr. Murphy – and all of you joining us today – my wife Marie and I would like to thank you for your extraordinary passion for truth and justice.

Genocide is the most terrible crime a people can undergo, or another people can commit. It must never be forgotten—to forget it would be to dull our consciences and diminish our own humanity. It must never be denied, but fully acknowledged – otherwise any meaningful attempt at reconciliation will be thwarted.

Brookdale College, the Center for Holocaust, Human Rights, and Genocide Education, and everyone who contributed to these exhibits, has performed a great service to our community—not only to Armenian-Americans, but to everyone, including those who deny the genocide. You are opening paths to the truth, and therefore to a better future.

In September 2000, I had put together and chaired a hearing on the Armenian Genocide and legislation to finally put the United States on record officially acknowledging it. It was a four-hour hearing, the first hearing the House of Representatives ever held on the Armenian Genocide. The testimony I heard that day, and accounts of the atrocities I have read in the articles and books over the years have shocked me deeply. The resolution H. Res. 398—vigorously opposed by the Clinton Administration—never got a vote.

But just as shocking then is what we still see today: a completely political and callous campaign to deny the Armenian genocide.

In 1915, there were about two million Armenians living in what was then the Ottoman Empire. They were living in a region that they inhabited for 2,500 years. By 1923, well over 90 percent of these Armenians had disappeared. Most of them, as many as 1.5 million were dead. The remainder had been forced into exile.

There is no lack of historical record. In fact, we only have to listen to the words of the US Ambassador to Turkey at the time, Henry Morgenthau, who called it a “campaign of race extermination.”

We only have to listen to the British, French, and Russian governments who said the Young Turks committed a “crime against humanity,” the first time in history that charge was ever made by one state against another.

And we only have to listen to the government of Turkey itself, which tried and convicted a number of high-ranking Young Turk officials for their role in what the Turkish government’s indictment called, “the massacre and destruction of the Armenians.”

When the term genocide was invented in 1944 to describe the systematic destruction of an entire people, its author Raphael Lemkin explained the term by saying it was “the sort of thing Hitler did to the Jews and the Turks did to the Armenians.”

The campaign to deny this genocide—often driven by the Turkish government—is repulsive. It is a slap in the face to Armenians everywhere. It is this denial that keeps the Armenian genocide a burning issue and prevents much needed healing of old wounds.

Armenians are unfortunately not alone in suffering the hurt and pain that stems from the denial of truth. The international community failed the victims of the Holocaust, China, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bosnia, DRC, Darfur, Syria to name a few.

That means that we here in the United States, and that means not only the Congress but also the President, have the responsibility to speak truthfully and to speak boldly about the past in order to secure our future.

We must write and speak the truth so that generations to come will not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Only 20 Nations around the world have recognized the Armenian Genocide. That includes Canada as well as eleven EU countries including France, Germany

Italy, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Greece and Cypress.

Conspicuously absent from the list of nations that have officially recognized the Armenian Genocide is the United States of America.

For my part, I am preparing to chair a congressional hearing on April 23—the day before Armenian Remembrance Day (April 24)—which this year marks the 100th anniversary of the genocide.

When political leaders fail to lead or denounce violence, the void is not only demoralizing to the victims but silence actually enables the wrongdoing. Silence by elected officials in particular conveys approval—or at least acquiescence—and can contribute to a climate of fear and a sense of vulnerability.

History has taught us that silence is not an option. We must do more.