



The Process Begins

The First Armenia-Diaspora Conference Ends with High Expectations

By SALPI HAROUTINIAN GHAZARIAN; Photos by MKHITAR KHACHATRIAN

The most important thing that came out of the first Armenia-Diaspora Conference, held September 22-23 in Yerevan, was that it happened at all. Many were the skeptics from Armenia and from the dozens of participating countries who admitted that they didn't believe the government could pull off a massive organization effort such as this turned out to be. Equally doubtful was whether the Diaspora would respond. But unlike most conferences, almost all of those who were invited actually came. Over 1,000 people participated either as members of regional delegations, or as invited individuals in this first-of-its-kind international conclave.

The second most important thing was that the Conference proceeded smoothly and calmly, followed a packed agenda and enabled

Armenians from Belarus to Brazil to articulate their vision of the Armenia-Diaspora relationship.

The third most important thing was that Diasporans who participated in the Conference came to realize that the government is serious about developing, fine-tuning and institutionalizing an ongoing process of Armenia-



President Kocharian at the Conference.

Diaspora relations. Seated around a large circle of tables were the representatives of the smallest and largest Diaspora communities, as well as the republic's leadership. The president and the prime minister, the head of parliament and the chairman of Armenia's Constitutional Court, were present for most of the two-day meeting. In the mornings, they addressed the participants; the remainder of the time, they listened to representatives of 59 delegations, each representing one country or geographic area. There were also statements by the leadership of major international institutions from churches and political parties to the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Armenia Fund and the Armenian Relief Society.

Observers seated high in the bleachers of Yerevan's Sports and Concert Complex (called the *Hamalir*) had a complete view of

the 60 ft. diameter central circle which was the first signal that this conference would not follow any old traditions.

The table had no head. All communities, regardless of size, had one representative who sat around the main table. The round center was surrounded by rows of chairs where entire delegations sat.

Delegation sizes differed – one person had come from India, nearly 100 from France, less than two dozen from England, a few from Uruguay, a handful from the Gulf countries, and nearly 200 each from the US and Russia. Still, each delegation was allotted five minutes for a statement. One person spoke for all of the Central Asian republics (where nearly 100,000 Armenians live) and another one on behalf of the Far East Asian countries of Thailand, China and Hong Kong (with less than 100 Armenians all together). Seated not far from them were the Canadian delegate whose community numbers over 50,000, and the representative from Georgia where some half a million Armenians reside.

Who Represents the Diaspora

It was clear as early as December 1988, when President Robert Kocharian issued a decree calling for such a conference, that the process of choosing delegates would be the primary concern for all communities. Who represents the Diaspora is the question that had to be answered. Yet it was a question that had not been formally asked until now. Some communities like Ukraine and Hungary had old communal structures for choosing leaders and it was they who attended the conference and spoke on behalf of the community. Others such as Austria succeeded in holding elections to choose their delegates to the Conference. However, some of the more fractured (and larger) communities such as the US and Syria, did not have their heads of delegation selected until the day before the conference began. In both cases, the Armenian government made it possible for different sides and parties to come together and overcome specific concerns to reach the goal of a unified, centralized delegation. Even the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party, whose two factions had not worked together for several years, came as one delegation and presented a joint report.

Working Together and Effectively

Chairing the Conference, and the Government Steering Committee which organized it, was Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian.

“For the first time ever, under one roof, representatives of Armenia and Diaspora

organizations came together, heard each other’s concerns, and agreed to look for ways to continue to work together on matters of mutual benefit. Now, more than ever, Armenia and Diaspora need each other, albeit in different ways, to secure their own survival and prosperity,” Oskanian said.

This note rang through each delegation’s report as well. There were common themes throughout: The need for more information from and about Armenia, the necessity of coordinating projects, the need to allow the Diaspora to develop independently of Armenia’s intervention, the desire by Diasporans to be included in planning in Armenia.

Special Themes

The Organizing Committee had asked several professionals and experts to prepare

specific papers on various themes.

The first one, entitled Communication and Linkages Between Diaspora Institutions and the Republic of Armenia was presented by Professor Khachig Tololyan of Wesleyan University. It examined the nature of Diaspora, the issues of representation inherent in the life of a dispersed, decentralized community, models of relationships and cooperation between homeland and Diaspora.

The second paper: Diaspora Humanitarian Assistance to Armenia in the Last Decade was prepared and presented by Hrach Tchilingirian, Managing Editor of AIM. Tchilingirian had asked for the financial reports of major international Diaspora organizations and studied emerging patterns in the kinds and quantities of humanitarian assistance provided since Armenia’s independence. Professor Kevork



Conference delegates placed flowers at the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Monument

Bardakjian of the University of Michigan spoke about Culture, Identity and Relations between Armenia and the Dispersion, and concentrated on the different ways in which Eastern and Western Armenians had evolved. Bardakjian addressed the linguistic, cultural and identity questions which have emerged as a result.

Daron Der Khachadourian presented a report on Information Technology and Communication, in which the need for a common information field among Armenians, as well as more effective communication and common thinking, were identified as priority goals. Der Khachadourian discussed how satellite broadcast technology can be utilized to further these goals. Indeed, this was one of the themes of Kocharian's address as well, when he called on the Armenia and Diaspora together to make possible Armenian television satellite broadcasts around the world.

Advocacy: Current Capacities and Options and Future Prospects was the theme developed jointly by the Armenian Assembly of America and the Armenian National Committee of America, whose executive directors, Ross Vartian and Aram Hamparian presented the report.

The final paper, on Armenia's economic development was written and presented by Economy Minister Armen Darbinian. In it, Darbinian called for the strengthening of the Armenian Development Agency to aid foreign investors and businessmen, and enable a greater flow of investments into Armenia. The same theme had been stressed by Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsian.

The same six themes were the focus of special discussion groups. Delegates were able to share opinions on the various aspects of each complex theme.

As a result of the thoughts and proposal expressed during the Conference, two documents were developed and received unanimous approval at the conclusion of the Conference. One was a statement of unity and resolve regarding the future and security of Karabakh. The other was a declaration of the will and intent of the conference. It touched on all aspects of the Armenia-Diaspora relationship: political, economic and social. It addressed the responsibilities of each toward the other. Perhaps most importantly, it called for the reform of all Armenian institutions within and outside Armenia.

Details and Logistics

From transportation to translation, the conference displayed various organizational and logistics issues which will continue to confront Armenia-Diaspora relations.

Although most presentations and discussion was conducted in Armenian, simultaneous translation into Russian, French and English was available throughout the conference. This



Left to right: Vahakn Hovnanian, builder, Kevork Toroyan, businessman, Harutiun Khachatryan, filmmaker from Yerevan, Gabriel Injejikian, educator from California during the Conference

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E-mail: convers.yerevan@rex_iasnet.ru • E-mail: convers@arminco.com • Internet: <http://converse.r.am>



The Conference was held at Yerevan's Sports and Concert Complex

huge expense was borne by various donors from around the world.

Transportation to and from the conference site was provided by Armenia's Transportation Ministry. Guests and participants were greeted at the airport by members of Armenia's State Protocol office. Social events held in conjunction with the conference (and with the anniversary of Armenia's independence) were open to conference attendees.

Now What?

Just as everyone was pleasantly surprised and satisfied at the conference proceedings, they were equally concerned about what comes next. The Armenian government made clear its intention to continue to push for such conferences. Prime Minister Sargsian even turned down one delegate's suggestion that the budget for such activities be divided between Armenia and the Diaspora. "No," he said seriously, "we will simply add this amount to our already huge deficit."

The Conference voted to extend the life of the Conference Steering Committee which had been created by Kocharian last year. Kocharian made clear that Oskanian will continue to head the work of this Committee, as well, even as he remains Foreign Minister.

Besides beginning work on the next conference, the Steering Committee will convene five standing working groups on each of the topics preliminarily examined at this conference, and to reconfigure the make-up of these

groups within a month in order to include a broader base of experts. At the same time, the conference charged the steering committee with constituting a sixth group to study the possibility and appropriateness of creating a coordinating body to deal with the emerging Armenia-Diaspora agenda.

Recognizing that reaching Diaspora Armenians through Diaspora organizations is only partially effective, the Steering Committee immediately launched a website www.armeniadiaspora.com in order to inform and enlist a greater number of professionals and interested individuals in the development of Armenia-Diaspora cooperation.

Minister Oskanian appealed to all those committed to participating in systematizing Armenia Diaspora relations to contact the committee, indicate their interest and expertise, and suggest solid forms of cooperation. "The conference was merely the beginning of a process which will continue to develop as individuals and organizations in the Diaspora find ways to interact in constructive, cooperative ways. And of course, as Armenia and Diaspora work together to build the necessary structures to solve mutual problems. The critical mass that we had said was needed to address our national priorities has begun to come together. Now, we must continue on the path of defining and tackling those priorities. The conference was the first step down that road, which will require consistency, and continuous involvement. We are convinced we are on the right path," Oskanian said. ■

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