



# ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY OF AMERICA

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## ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY PARTICIPATES IN THIRD ARMENIA-DIASPORA CONFERENCE

### **Celebrates Armenia's Independence**

Yerevan, Armenia – Led by Board of Trustees Chairman Hirair Hovnanian, an Armenian Assembly delegation traveled to Armenia this week to commemorate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the nation's independence and take part in a major pan-Armenian Conference.

The Armenia-Diaspora Conference, a three-day event designed to explore new possibilities and prospects, began on September 18 with opening remarks by Armenia's President Robert Kocharian, an official blessing by His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians and His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. Nagorno Karabakh President Arkady Ghokassian and representatives of several religious, philanthropic, cultural and youth organizations also addressed the opening session.

The Assembly delegation included Chairman Hovnanian, Treasurer Edele Hovnanian, Board Member Noubar Afeyan, Executive Director Bryan Ardouny and Country Director Arpi Vartanian.

Executive Director Ardouny, who addressed the Conference on behalf of the Assembly, commended Armenia for all of its accomplishments during its 15 years of independence.

“Throughout this decade and a half, marked with global power shifts, regional fragility and domestic transition, the people of Armenia and Karabakh demonstrated a stoic sense of commitment to freedom, and a resounding ability to succeed where it matters most,” said Ardouny. [Text of speech attached]

Edele Hovnanian discussed the Birthright Armenia program which she founded, while Noubar Afeyan spoke on behalf of Armenia 2020, a scenario-building initiative that focuses on possible development models for what Armenia could look like in the year 2020.

The Conference agenda also included a plenary session on a Rural Poverty Eradication Program which was led by Armenia's Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan. The session featured an overview presentation, statements by sponsors and partners and discussion and debate.

A forum entitled “New Answers to Old Questions: Armenians in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” began with opening remarks by the Chairman of the Armenian National Assembly Tigran Torosyan. The forum included four panel discussions entitled “The Nation, State and Identity; The Mechanics of Diaspora-Homeland Relations; and Repatriation and Territory of Common Identity and A Look at Diaspora 2020.” The final panel was moderated by Assembly Board Member Noubar Afeyan and Edele Hovnanian was a discussant.

The Conference wrapped up with speeches by Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian, Chairman of the Armenia-Diaspora III Planning Commission, who discussed the importance of the pan-Armenian event, followed by President Kocharian who stressed the significance of the Armenian Diaspora before officially closing the program.

Assembly leaders also joined Conference participants in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide Memorial.

On September 21, Assembly leaders participated in Armenia’s Independence Day celebrations in and around Yerevan. Board of Trustees Chairman Hirair Hovnanian sent a letter to President Kocharian congratulating him and the people of Armenia on this historic anniversary.

Chairman Hovnanian praised Armenia for its ability to overcome the challenges that it has faced, stating “Our young republic has overcome many challenges in the past fifteen years and as always, our people persevere with dignity and patience, facing down the many socio-economic hardships accompanying an economy in transition. Tested time and time again, they are more determined than ever to build a stable and prosperous country and a better future for all Armenians.”

President George W. Bush also wrote to President Kocharian, conveying America’s well wishes to the people of Armenia on this milestone occasion.

“The ties of friendship between our countries are strong and enduring,” President Bush wrote. “The United States will continue to support the government and people of Armenia in their efforts to build a stable and democratic nation, as well as to promote a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. I commend you on Armenia’s success since independence, and I look forward to strengthening further the already excellent relationship between our two countries.”

The Armenian Assembly is the largest Washington-based nationwide organization promoting public understanding and awareness of Armenian issue. It is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt membership organization.

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**Photographs:**



**Caption:** Executive Director Bryan Ardouny (center) joins Diasporans from around the world at the third Armenia-Diaspora Conference.



**Caption:** Participants of the third Armenia-Diaspora Conference at the Demirchian Sports Complex in Yerevan.

*Editors Note: Below is the full text of Assembly Executive Director Bryan Ardouny's remarks.*

**ARMENIA-DIASPORA CONFERENCE III  
SEPTEMBER 18-20, 2006  
YEREVAN**

President Kocharian,  
President Ghoukassian,  
Your Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians,  
Your Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia,  
Honorable Guests, Friends and Colleagues:

On behalf of the Armenian Assembly, I congratulate the people of Armenia, and Armenians worldwide on the fifteenth anniversary of the independence of Armenia. I also wish to extend special thanks to the Armenian government for the excellent organization of this conference, and the outstanding hospitality afforded us.

Armenia deserves tremendous credit for all of its accomplishments during this short, historic, and at times, difficult period of independence. Throughout this decade and a half, marked with global power shifts, regional fragility and domestic transition, the people of Armenia and Karabakh demonstrated a stoic sense of commitment to freedom, and a resounding ability to succeed where it matters most. We are confident that in the future too, the spirit and talent of our people, including the activism of our youth will continue to guide our progress, consistent with our shared vision of a free, secure, prosperous and democratic homeland, at peace with its neighbors, a recognized leader in the region, and fully integrated within the global community.

The value of the Diaspora as both an element and dimension of Armenia's national security is taking shape. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the outline of the public version of Armenia's draft national security strategy, which considers the Diaspora as both a bridge to the world, and a catalyst for pan-Armenian integration. We welcome this process.

Our communities worldwide do indeed bring a global dimension to the Armenian identity, which, powered by a measure of spiritual integrity, social energy, mutual commitment, and collective organization, transcends borders and distances, affording us a capacity of mutual awareness and reach that many other nations seek, but seldom attain. We view this conference as an opportunity to discuss and learn from other participants, on how we can best capitalize on this advantage based on an integrated assessment of our needs and resources, and having Armenia's nation-building as a primary concern.

This conference also has a clearly defined focus: the Diaspora's contribution to Armenia's rural development, through projects strengthening communities in the country's border areas. The program deals with development and investment — a core track for Diasporan involvement in Armenia, and a major focus of our conference this week. We welcome the government's commitment to assure the integrity of the program, through all relevant phases and aspects of planning, implementation and oversight.

It is heartening to see so much entrepreneurship and commercial activity taking place in and around Yerevan. Armenia's progress in macroeconomic and other structural reforms, according

to the World Bank, IMF, and others, is impressive. While the country has sustained economic growth in double digits, statistics also point to a growing poverty gap in society.

That is why the government's program for rural rehabilitation is so important and complements a five-year, \$235 million special U.S. grant to Armenia under the Millennium Challenge Account. This compact between our two countries, concluded this spring, supports road and irrigation infrastructure development in Armenia's regions. The Armenian Assembly has taken a very active role in endorsing Armenia's eligibility for this grant. The Assembly was pleased that the historic signing of the compact, in which Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice participated, took place during the Assembly's Advocacy Conference. The compact is extended in recognition of Armenia's progress in democratic reform, among other areas. Armenia's continued eligibility for this and many other programs depends on the success of that reform – the most important source of its competitive strength in the region, and ultimately, its path to greater geopolitical leverage.

Armenia's democratic development, its international standing, and the effectiveness of our advocacy are interrelated. We have a unique opportunity to increase the pace and solidify the integrity of Armenia's national reforms. Armenia is soon entering an election season, and shall have more than one occasion to demonstrate to its people and the international community that Armenians are committed to democracy and the rule of law.

As a non-partisan advocacy organization, our mission is to ensure a secure, prosperous and democratic Armenia. Therefore, we are critically interested in seeing democracy and the rule of law succeed.

Indeed, there are many challenges facing all of us, including continued attempts to deny the Armenian Genocide, and thus the continued need to ensure its universal affirmation. As we meet here today, lawyers are gathering in federal court in Massachusetts to hear a lawsuit brought by a Turkish association and others challenging the ability to teach about the Genocide in Massachusetts classrooms. We met this latest affront to the memory of our ancestors by assembling a top notch legal team and joining with survivors, teachers and the Massachusetts Attorney General in taking the fight right to those who would deny Genocide and revise history.

We will also continue our efforts to ensure robust levels of assistance to Armenia and Karabakh, maintain parity in U.S. military assistance to Armenia and Azerbaijan, and support the people of Karabakh's right to self-determination. Karabakh has earned its right for statehood, having demonstrated an exemplary competence both on the battlefield, and in state-building. As a responsible party to the cease-fire, it should be entrusted with similar responsibilities in the peace process as well.

As Armenia progresses in its nation-building, and the U.S.-Armenia relationship matures, we too realize the need to adjust our approach and agenda to the evolving parameters of this growing relationship, ever-mindful of the changing landscape of regional and international politics. We must meet attempts to isolate or exclude Armenia and Karabakh head on. We cannot and must not let economic strangulation become the next killer. We simply cannot stand for it.

That is why we strongly supported congressional legislation to bar U.S. assistance for a rail bypass of Armenia. Earlier this year, we successfully fought for, and secured a unanimous vote in the House of Representatives, which did just that. We will continue our advocacy efforts in this regard.

In parallel, we will review other critical policy areas, which take stronger note of Armenia's needs in energy security, access to regional infrastructure, increased regional trade and investment, and core capacities in intellectual property, technology and communications infrastructure. Support for assistance programs targeting education, healthcare, social, and cultural needs is also important.

This conference is about building partnerships for Armenia and the Diaspora, and that includes partnerships across our communities. Armenia's challenges are multi-dimensional; therefore our responses must be as well. Guided by the principle of inclusiveness, non-partisanship and respect for the choices made by the people of Armenia and Karabakh, we can make change happen and take great pride in our future.

As Armenia and Karabakh celebrate their 15<sup>th</sup> year of independence and the Armenian Assembly readies for its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we pledge to continue our efforts to ensure a stronger, more prosperous and democratic homeland and an even more effective Armenian Assembly with the resources to meet tomorrow's challenges.

We look forward to combining our efforts with all who share this vision.

Thank you.