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PRESS RELEASE

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Zoryan Institute and Armenian Government Organize Major International Genocide Conference

Yerevan, Armenia — An international conference on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide was held in Yerevan April 20-21, 2005. Titled “Ultimate Crime, Ultimate Challenge,” the objective of the conference was to search for ways of transcending genocide, to determine what it takes to bring together the conflicting and tortured memories of peoples in conflict due to genocide, and to help create building blocks for the normalization of relations between perpetrator and victim groups.

The conference was held under the auspices of the National Commission on the 90th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. The Zoryan Institute was involved since the beginning in 2003 in the conceptualizing, organizational counseling, and participation of this event.

1. “The Desecration of Human Rights, Past and Present.” It included presentations on the legal aspects of genocide and an analysis of whether or not genocides can be avoided.
2. “The Ultimate Crime,” and examined the Armenian and Rwandan Genocides, and genocide denial.
3. “Prevention and Action.” There were papers on the Israeli position on the Armenian Genocide, “Factors Facilitating and Impeding Genocide,” and a comparison of the US and UN responses to Rwanda and Darfur.
4. “Ultimate Challenge: Truth, Reconciliation, and Transitional Justice.” There were papers on impunity as a factor in the Armenian Genocide, a comparison of how Turkey and Japan are dealing with their difficult pasts, and reconciliation.
5. “Turkish-Armenian Relations: Divided by History, United by Geography.” Papers in this session dealt with “Obstacles to Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation,” “Promoting Recognition of the Armenian Genocide via Third Parties,” how collectivities remember their past, genocide as a factor in Armenia’s foreign policy, and an overview of how far we have come on this issue and where we may be going.

The subject was approached through various themes in five sessions. Session I dealt with “The Desecration of Human Rights, Past and Present.” It included presentations on the legal aspects of genocide and an analysis on whether or not genocides can be avoided. Session II was titled, “The Ultimate Crime,” and examined the Armenian and Rwandan Genocides, and genocide denial. Session III was devoted to “Prevention and Action.” There were papers on the Israeli position on the Armenian Genocide, “Factors Facilitating and Impeding Genocide,” and a comparison of the US and UN responses to Rwanda and Darfur. Session IV was titled, “Ultimate Challenge: Truth, Reconciliation, and Transitional Justice.” There were papers on impunity as a factor in the Armenian Genocide, a comparison of how Turkey and Japan are dealing with their difficult pasts, and reconciliation. The theme of Session V was “Turkish-Armenian Relations: Divided by History, United by Geography.” Papers in this session dealt with “Obstacles to Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation,” “Promoting Recognition of the Armenian Genocide via Third Parties,” how collectivities remember their past, genocide as a factor in Armenia’s foreign policy, and an overview of how far we have come on this issue and where we may be going.

After inaugural speeches by President Robert Kocharyan, Catholicos Karekin II, and Dr. Juan Mendez, Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide, Prof. Roger W. Smith, Chairman of Zoryan’s Academic Board, introduced the academic portion of the program by speaking about the significance of the Armenian Genocide after 90 years. He said, in part,

Each genocide provides a foundation for subsequent horrors. Each historical misrepresentation of efforts to exterminate a particular ethnic group increases the likelihood that such efforts will be undertaken again in another time and place.

We do not ordinarily think of the dead as having rights. But there is at least one they possess: the right to have the world ‘hear and learn the truth about the circumstances of their death.’ This is the right that ninety years later can still be restored to them, and surely we can do no less.

Yet without remembrance of past examples of genocide, there will be no sense of urgency in the present, no perceived need to prevent future atrocities. Further, we will cut ourselves off from the knowledge of the causes and sequences of genocide, knowledge that might help prevent other peoples from being subjected to this crime against humanity. The Armenian Genocide is particularly instructive in that it is the prototype for much of the genocide in the twentieth century and the new millennium.

Of particular interest was the participation of political dignitaries with reputations for high moral authority in the area of human rights. These include Lech Walesa, Former leader of the Solidarity movement, Former President of the Republic of Poland and Nobel Peace Laureate; Yossi Sarid, Member of the Knesset and Former Israeli Minister of Education; Giancarlo Pagliarini, Member of Parliament, Chamber of Deputies, Italy; and Marie-Anne Isler-Beguín, Chairwoman, Delegation to the EU-Armenia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, European Parliament.

There were four participants from Israel: Yossi Sarid, the well known advocate for Israeli recognition of the Armenian Genocide, were Dr. Yair Auron, a professor at the Open University of Israel and Kibbutzim College, and a member of Zoryan's Academic Board; Yehuda Bauer, Academic Advisor at Yad Vashem; and Israel Charny, Executive Director of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide, Vice-President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, and Editor-in-Chief of the Encyclopedia of Genocide. In addition to their powerful and thought-provoking presentations, these four made a special visit to Dzidzernagapert, the Armenian Genocide Memorial, and planted a tree in memory of the victims of the Genocide. As part of that activity, they held a press conference there and spoke forcefully about the need for all countries to recognize the Armenian Genocide, and especially Israel, a country itself that grew out of a genocide.

Also of interest was the participation of several Turkish scholars: Taner Akçam, Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Minnesota and a widely published author on the Armenian Genocide and Turkish-Armenian relations; Murat Belge, Professor of Comparative Literature at Bilgi University, Istanbul; and Baskin Oran, Professor of Political Science at the University of Ankara and the author of fourteen books.

The closing address by Vartan Oskanian, Foreign Minister of Armenia, electrified the conference with a reasoned and impassioned speech. He began by saying, "...I want to thank the Zoryan Institute for their professional and organizational counsel. I especially wish to thank the scholars, writers, professors - all with serious work and time commitments - who traveled to Armenia to be here with us at this time, this year. The symbolism is not lost on anyone. We are here 90 years later calling for recognition and prevention so that in 2015 we can gather together only for remembrance." He continued by explaining the importance of Turkey's recognizing the Armenian Genocide.

There is no national history in a vacuum. No nation can escape its history entirely, it can only transcend it. But to transcend, one must confront history, both internally and in relation to others. And those others, too, must also jointly confront theirs.

In other words, Armenia and Turkey must confront their histories. Individually and together. Armenia believes Turkey must put excuses aside and enter into normal relations with a neighbor that is neither going to go away nor forget its history.

We are not the only neighbors in the world who have had, and who continue to have, a troubled relationship. Troubled memories, a tortured past, recriminations, unsettled accounts and the enduring wounds of victimhood, plague the national consciousness of peoples on many borders. In our case, some distance between our two countries might have allowed us to put distance between our past and our future. But we have no such luxury. There is no space, no cushion, between us. We live right here, close by, reminded at all times of the great loss that we incurred. Yet it is because we live right next door that we must be willing and

prepared to transcend the past.

But we can only do so if the demons of the past have been rejected by our neighbor, too. You notice, I didn't say 'by the perpetrator.' Armenians are able to distinguish between the perpetrators and today's government of Turkey. Two-thirds of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire were massacred or deported between 1915 and 1918. Today's Republic of Turkey must be able to condemn these acts for what they are. The evidence is overwhelming, clear, unavoidable.

However, he expressed the Armenian Government's willingness, nonetheless, to establish diplomatic relations with Turkey, with no preconditions. He explained that during that week, he had been interviewed by Turkish journalists and was surprised at the misinformation they had about Armenia's attitudes and policies regarding Turkey. For example, they did not know that the border between Armenia and Turkey is open on the Armenian side and closed only on the Turkish side. They did not know that Armenia has no pre-conditions for establishing diplomatic relations with Turkey. They were highly surprised that even the recognition of Genocide is not a precondition. They were also surprised that the Kars Treaty has not been denounced or revoked by the Government of Armenia. The full text of this important speech can be found at <http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com>.

Overall, the conference was a great success in several respects. It brought together renowned specialists to present and discuss their research and ideas on genocide, its prevention, and reconciliation between victim and perpetrator groups. It brought together Turkish and Armenian scholars to discuss politically sensitive issues with openness and mutual respect. The entire proceedings of the conference were broadcast live on television and seen worldwide through satellite. Perhaps most importantly the conference organizers made a point of inviting a number of journalists from Turkey, who reported on the conference proceedings back home and promoted awareness of the Armenian Genocide to Turkish civil society.

Full details of the speakers, their biographies, and the text of their speeches can be found at <http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com/conference/>.

The Zoryan Institute is the first non-profit, international center devoted to the research and documentation of contemporary issues related to Armenian social, political and cultural life. To this end, the Institute conducts multidisciplinary research, publication, and educational programs dealing with Armenia, the Armenian Genocide, and Diaspora, within a universal context.