

Armenian National Committee of America

*"The Armenian American Community
and U.S. Foreign Assistance Policy"*

Christopher M. Hekimian
ANCA Government Affairs Director

Testimony before the House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Export Financing
and Related Programs

March 31, 1998

Armenian National Committee of America:

The Armenian American Community and U.S. Foreign Assistance Policy

Thank you Chairman Callahan and members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs for the opportunity to appear before this distinguished panel for the purpose of offering the views of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), the nation's oldest and largest Armenian American grassroots advocacy organization.

Supporting U.S. Leadership Abroad

As we have in years past, Mr. Chairman, I would like to stress at the outset that Armenian Americans remain among the most ardent advocates of American leadership abroad. As a community, we have consistently worked to ensure a policy of international engagement and have supported an active Congressional role in foreign policy decision-making.

With these thoughts in mind, on behalf of all Armenian Americans, I would like to express our appreciation for your principled leadership of this distinguished panel and for your ongoing efforts to enact legislation which advances our values and interests around the world.

As you know, foreign aid represents a strategic investment which favorably impacts United States national interests on a variety of levels. Wisely targeted assistance programs to emerging nations advance U.S. national interests, not only by promoting democracy, building peace, and meeting humanitarian needs, but also by laying the groundwork for long-term commercial relations. The investment we make today in the newly independent states will lead to increased market share in the future for U.S. exports and expanded trade opportunities for U.S. businesses.

Mr. Chairman, foreign assistance remains an essential element of U.S. leadership in an increasingly complex world. Foreign assistance programs can help prevent or resolve international conflicts before they reach unmanageable proportions. Foreign assistance can be an effective catalyst for the spread of democracy and respect for human rights. It can also help jump-start economies of the developing world and, in the process, make these nations valuable trading partners. History has shown that the 1% of federal spending dedicated to this purpose represents a vital portion of the U.S. budget.

It is for the reasons I have just outlined that the ANCA considers it imperative that the integrity of the International Affairs (150) account for the fiscal year 1999 budget is carefully safeguarded, making sure that it has the critical mass to fulfill its mission. We firmly oppose cuts in this account and are working, along with other concerned organizations, such as the Campaign to Preserve U.S. Global Leadership, to encourage Congress to appropriate sufficient levels of funding to meet the challenges of the present era. We place special value on foreign assistance programs to the emerging economies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Specifically, we are pleased by the importance placed on these nations by the administration as evidenced by their request for an additional \$155 million in assistance to the NIS, as well as Congress' continued support for this region. At the same time, we support the application of a

consistent set of conditions on foreign assistance recipients regarding their commitment to democratic principles, economic reform and, above all, respect for human rights.

Expanding U.S. Assistance to Armenia

The ANCA and the entire Armenian American community deeply appreciate the assistance appropriated by Congress to meet humanitarian needs and promote economic and democratic reforms in Armenia. This assistance has strengthened Armenia's confidence in its development effort, enhanced stability throughout the region, and served as an important symbol of American leadership in the promotion of democracy and prosperity in the region.

We are confident that, as Armenia's economy improves, the Armenian people will develop self-sufficiency and will, in time, no longer look to the United States, or any other nation, for economic assistance. However, we must stress again that this improvement is closely linked to how soon the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades of Armenia are lifted. These blockades have caused severe shortages of basic necessities throughout Armenia and hindered economic development. The politically-imposed poverty created by these blockades has caused more than 800,000 Armenians to leave their homeland.

United States assistance to Armenia is needed, in great measure, to offset the devastating effects of the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades. Over the long-term, neither the Armenian American community nor the people of Armenia seek dependence on economic assistance from other nations. However, during these critical years, assistance from the United States to Armenia plays a pivotal role in enabling the Armenian economy to unleash its potential, despite the artificial handicaps it has been forced to endure.

Accordingly, the ANCA supports a hard-earmark of at least \$100 million for Armenia for fiscal year 1999 to help offset the devastating effects of the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades and to help continue Armenia's transition to a democratic, free-market nation. These funds will be used to meet the country's current humanitarian needs, develop the economy and infrastructure, and promote the strengthening of democratic institutions. We are confident that an economically viable Armenia will be a catalyst for economic development throughout the Caucasus and all of the New Independent States.

Mr. Chairman, the ANCA considers it important that the assistance package for Armenia targets the nation's current priorities and takes advantage of the growing community of non-governmental organizations in Armenia. Among Armenia's leading development priorities are the following:

- * Modernization and development of the energy sector;
- * Expansion of public health programs, with special emphasis on the plight of the elderly, children, the disabled, and working mothers;
- * Acceleration of redevelopment in the earthquake stricken zone, which remains in dire need of housing and other construction;

- * Support for ongoing democratic reforms and institution building, including training and exchange programs;
- * Development of a healthy agricultural sector and progress toward agricultural self-sufficiency;
- * Development of small and viable business enterprises, focusing on the growth of local economies located outside the nation's capital;
- * Support for education, with emphasis on the modernization of facilities and support for teachers.

On the matter of democratic reforms in Armenia, it is important to note that, unlike many of the emerging nations of the former Soviet Union, the Armenian people have a strong democratic tradition which dates back to the earlier periods of the nation's history.

This tradition, and the Armenian people's fundamental commitment to democracy and the rule of law, was illustrated recently following the resignation of the Armenian president in February of this year. The orderly transfer of power to acting President and Prime Minister Robert Kocharian followed constitutional guidelines and was fully consistent with international democratic standards. The presidential transition was completed yesterday with the selection by the Armenian people of their next president.

Armenian Americans welcome Armenia's free and fair elections and share in the confidence of the Armenian people in continued progress toward democratic pluralism. This confidence is based on the long-standing democratic traditions of which I just spoke. As many members of this panel may know, even under the oppressive rule of the Ottoman Turks, the Armenians opted to govern their community life with a model constitution based on the highest principles of representative government. In more contemporary times, the first Armenian Republic of 1918, under the leadership of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, was a model of democracy which was strongly supported by the United States under President Woodrow Wilson.

The Armenian American community, dating back to the tragic earthquake of 1988, has reached out, through private contributions, to fund reconstruction projects, resettle refugees, and address other pressing relief needs of the Armenian people. These contributions, and the work of such non-governmental groups as the Armenian Relief Society, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Armenian Missionary Association of America, the Armenian Technology Group, Armenian Medical Outreach, the Armenian Assembly, as well as the Armenian Church, will continue. However, the role played by United States assistance to Armenia goes beyond the scope of private contributions and fulfills a longer-range strategic purpose.

Providing Direct U.S. Aid to Nagorno Karabagh

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you and your colleagues on this Subcommittee for allocating \$12.5 million to Nagorno Karabagh for fiscal year 1998. Until this decisive action on your part, the people of Nagorno Karabagh had been the only population in the Caucasus to have been denied any United States assistance. For fiscal year 1999, the ANCA supports a hard-earmark of at least \$20 million for the people of Nagorno Karabagh.

As members of this panel are well aware, for seventy years, during Soviet era, the people of Nagorno Karabagh suffered under a repressive Soviet regime and the persecution of the Soviet Azerbaijani government. The people of Nagorno Karabagh sought, through legal and constitutional means, to assert their right to self-determination. Their peaceful efforts were answered by Azerbaijani aggression and a military campaign aimed at depopulating Nagorno Karabagh of its Armenian population. For the last ten years, the people of Nagorno Karabagh struggled, first for their own survival and then to assert their right to self-determination. Having proven their resolve by successfully defending their homes and families against outside threats, the people of Nagorno Karabagh exercised their rights under international law and declared Nagorno Karabagh an independent republic.

Today, the Republic of Nagorno Karabagh is an active participant in negotiations organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and a key contributor to peace in the region. During a recent visit to the United States, Nagorno Karabagh's Foreign Minister Naira Melkounian stated during her presentation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that:

The people and the government of the Republic of Nagorno Karabagh are committed to peace and have been ready all along to engage in direct negotiations with the Republic of Azerbaijan to resolve the current conflict. The Republic of Nagorno Karabagh remains willing to reach a settlement based on realistic compromises and mutual concessions. As participants in the OSCE in the OSCE Minsk Group process, we are trying to make this a reality because we recognize, as I'm sure do all of you, that a negotiated settlement represents the best option for the peoples of Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabagh to reach peace.

We believe that it is the responsibility of the United States and the international community to support the people of Nagorno Karabagh as they seek to bring an end to a conflict that has already claimed too many lives. Karabagh is entirely blockaded by a hostile Azerbaijan, with the strong backing of Turkey. In these circumstances, the people of Nagorno Karabagh are faced with pressing humanitarian needs and the difficult task of rebuilding the social and economic infrastructure of their republic. It is, therefore, imperative that the United States continues sending relief assistance and participate in this reconstruction effort without waiting for the final outcome of the OSCE negotiations.

Mr. Chairman, it is clear that peace in the region cannot come by force and intimidation. The 1996 Lisbon Summit of the OSCE provided ample evidence that the Karabagh issue requires patient and constructive diplomacy by the international community. The Congress has wisely recognized that humanitarian assistance provided directly to Nagorno Karabagh will build a healthier environment for the OSCE negotiations. Unfortunately, despite repeated assurances, the Administration has yet to begin implementation of any assistance programs in Nagorno Karabagh. Now, more than six months into the fiscal year, the absence of this assistance indirectly rewards those nations that have imposed the blockades which the U.S. has openly condemned.

A recent report commissioned by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on the humanitarian needs of the victims of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict called attention to a number of important issues, but ultimately fell short of addressing the full scope of the pressing humanitarian and developmental needs in Nagorno Karabagh. We were pleased to see that USAID Administrator Brian Atwood, in testimony before this Subcommittee, stated that the Administration is ready to implement childhood immunization and is considering shelter projects in Karabagh. We remain deeply troubled, however, by the slow pace of implementation and the efforts by some in the Administration to divert funds allocated by Congress from their intended purpose.

United States assistance to Nagorno Karabagh represents an important confidence-building measure. Any efforts to divert these funds away from the people of Nagorno Karabagh, in addition to contravening the will of Congress, will prove to be counter-productive, both in terms of the peace process and U.S. regional interests.

The Administration's past efforts to exclude Nagorno Karabagh from U.S. assistance programs, and more recent efforts to divert funds allocated by Congress from their intended purpose, represent an unhealthy politicization of our foreign assistance program. Humanitarian aid should be distributed based on need, not the dictates of the government in Baku or any foreign capital. We are hopeful that this shortcoming will be corrected.

In our view, targeted reconstruction support to Nagorno Karabagh will prove, over time, to be an investment in peace in a region of great strategic significance to the United States. The ANCA would like to work with the Foreign Operations Subcommittee to offer specific recommendations about how such an assistance package could be delivered to the people of Nagorno Karabagh.

Maintaining the Restriction on U.S. Assistance to Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's blockades of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh, coupled with Turkey's continued obstruction of humanitarian supplies to Armenia, has led to a chronic lack of heating fuel, a scarcity of electricity, and severe shortages of food, fuel, medicine and other desperately needed supplies. Congress, in October of 1992, responded to this unacceptable situation by restricting U.S. assistance to the Azerbaijani government until it ended its aggression and lifted its blockades against Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh. To date, successive Azerbaijani governments have steadfastly refused to either lift their blockade or abandon a military solution to the conflict.

It should be clear that the reasons for the ban on U.S. assistance to the government of Azerbaijan continues to exist as compellingly as ever and therefore the ban itself continues to have strong bipartisan support in both houses of Congress. The ANCA strongly supports the law restricting U.S. assistance to the government of Azerbaijan and actively opposes any effort to weaken, waive, or eliminate this prohibition. Any effort to circumvent the intent of this provision of law, particularly during the ongoing negotiations, will be viewed by the Azerbaijani government as a clear signal for renewed aggression.

Placing Conditions on U.S. Assistance to Turkey

The Armenian American community has long held reservations regarding the high levels of U.S. foreign assistance to Turkey. We therefore welcome the Administration's belated decision to cut all military grants and loans to Turkey.

As we have said in past testimony before this panel, Armenian Americans remain deeply concerned by the devastating impact of Turkey's five-year blockade of humanitarian assistance to Armenia, the threat to regional stability posed by Turkey's ongoing military build-up, and the destabilizing effect of Turkey's support for Azerbaijani aggression against Nagorno Karabagh. Furthermore, the Armenian American community is troubled by the distrust and increased regional instability caused by Turkey's policy of denying the Armenian Genocide.

In addition, the Armenian American community is troubled by Turkey's long history of human rights abuses at home and aggression abroad. This pattern includes the systematic and widespread use of torture and human rights abuses against its own citizens, the genocidal policies being pursued against the Kurdish population, the unfair restrictions on the rights of Christian communities, and the continuing occupation of Cyprus.

For many decades, the United States essentially turned a blind eye to Turkey's consistent failure to meet even minimum standards for human rights and humanitarian practices. Recently, however, there has been notable progress in the linkage of U.S. assistance levels to Turkey's unacceptable behavior. As part of the fiscal year 1997 foreign assistance bill, the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act, which prohibits all U.S. assistance to Turkey as long as it maintains its illegal blockade of U.S. humanitarian assistance to Armenia, was amended to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

Unfortunately, the President, has exercised the national security waiver of this law as it relates to Turkey. In so doing, he effectively rejected the bipartisan will of Congress that U.S. aid to Turkey should be linked to its lifting of the blockade of Armenia. In his justification to Congress, the President failed to make a convincing argument for the waiver. Nor did he offer any evidence that the Administration is actively seeking to secure the lifting of the Turkish blockade. It is our view that the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act represents sound policy and a reasoned step toward lifting the Turkish blockade of U.S. humanitarian aid to Armenia. It should be immediately and strictly enforced.

I would like to conclude by stressing the dangers presented by the increase in United States weapons sales and transfers to Turkey. These escalating transfers and sales, as well as the increasing cascade of NATO weapons to Turkey, threaten to accelerate the regional arms race, seriously harming U.S. interests. It should be clear by now that the U.S. should not place more arms in the hands of a nation which is actively involved in aggression against its own citizens and which has openly threatened its neighbors. The use of U.S. supplied weapons by the Turkish military in human rights abuses against civilians has been documented by both the State and Defense departments.

On a number of occasions over the past several years, the Congress raised serious reservations regarding the sale or transfer of weaponry to Turkey. On two occasions, namely the sale of SuperCobra helicopter and the transfer of naval frigates, the Administration responded to these concerns by placing the transactions in question on hold. In a third instance, the Administration ignored bipartisan Congressional opposition and approved the controversial sale to Turkey of ATACM missiles.

Accordingly, we call upon Congress to continue to exercise its oversight authority by carefully scrutinizing U.S. military sales and transfers to Turkey. We recommend that special attention be given to any U.S. military hardware which may be used by the Turkish armed forces in Cyprus, against Kurdish civilians or which may be transferred to Azerbaijan for use against Nagorno Karabagh.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and to reaffirm the support of the Armenian American community for our nation's foreign assistance program.
