

Hansard record for Baroness Cox's question on 1915 Armenian atrocities (16th June 2015)

Question raised by Baroness Cox (CB), To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they have any plans to recognise the killings of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians in 1915 as genocide.

The Earl of Courtown (Con): My Lords, Her Majesty's Government recognise the terrible suffering inflicted on the Armenian people and other groups living in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. While remembering and honouring the victims of the past, we believe that the UK's priority should be to help the peoples and Governments of Turkey and Armenia to face their joint history together.

Baroness Cox (CB): My Lords, in thanking the Minister for his reply, may I ask whether he is aware that over 20 states have recognised the genocide, including France, Canada, Poland, Chile and Austria, as well as the European Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, on the basis of irrefutable evidence of the systematic slaughter of 1.5 million Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians? As His Holiness Pope Francis has emphasised the necessity of genocide recognition for healing, reconciliation and moving forward, will Her Majesty's Government seriously consider reviewing their position?

The Earl of Courtown: I thank the noble Baroness for her question and pay tribute to the many visits that she has made to that part of world. Her Majesty's Government are aware of His Holiness the Pope's comments during the papal mass to commemorate the victims of 1915, which was held in Rome. We respect his view and agree that it is important to face the lessons of history with courage and do all that we can to prevent similar atrocities. Her Majesty's Government reviewed their position of recognition in 2013 and, at present, we have no plans to conduct another review.

Lord Harrison (Lab): My Lords, it is true that it was genocide that was practised on the Armenians and other peoples in 1915. Will the Minister reply on the necessity of bringing together the Armenians and our colleagues in Turkey in order to find reconciliation? Will he also report on the conversations that HMG have had with our Armenian colleagues about the renewal of their application for closer relations within the European Union?

The Earl of Courtown: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord for that question. Lastly he mentioned a report on the negotiations and conversations with Armenia and the European Union. I am not aware of those at present but I shall write to the noble Lord if there is any further information that I can give him. He also mentioned how we can bring together the two different parties, the Armenians and the Turks, and get some kind of reconciliation going. We are trying to promote links between Turkey and Armenia in a number of ways. We have had a successful exchange of Turkish and Armenian Chevening alumni, who have visited each others' countries for the first time. We have also targeted funding on projects such as CivilNet TV, which is a media source for Turkey-related news in Armenia.

Baroness Ludford (LD): My Lords, given the recent Turkish election results which gave encouraging signals about openness and pluralism, including the election of three MPs of Armenian-Turkish identity, will the Government consider ways in which they can renew the encouragement of allies, in both Turkey and Armenia, to set up a joint historical commission? Can they offer specific ways in which they can support such a commission to look into the tragic events of 1915, which affected not only Armenians but other minorities and Turks?

The Earl of Courtown: The noble Baroness is quite right. As she mentioned, it is particularly pleasing to see MPs of Armenian background in the Turkish Parliament. As to getting the different groups together, our priority should be to promote reconciliation between the peoples and Governments of Armenia and Turkey and to enable the two countries to face their joint history together.

Lord Singh of Wimbledon (CB): My Lords, is the Government's response to genocide and human rights abuse predicated by who does it and where it occurs? I ask the question because when I raised the issue of the mass killing of Sikhs in India about a year ago, I was told that that is a matter for the Indian Government.

The Earl of Courtown: No, I cannot agree with the noble Lord. I am not aware of the response that was given concerning the Sikhs in India, and there is nothing more I can add.

Lord Flight (Con): My Lords, while the treatment of the Armenians in 1915 is to be condemned absolutely as genocide, might we be able to persuade Armenia to withdrawn from those parts of Azerbaijan which it has been illegally occupying for some 20 years?

The Earl of Courtown: Someone has whispered in my ear that I should wish the noble Lord a happy birthday, but they did not tell me where to look in the folder. Twenty-one years—I hope this is the right answer—have now passed since the ceasefire brought the active phase of the conflict to an end. For over 20 years the parties have not been able to reach a peace settlement. That has also meant over 20 years of continued hostility, hatred and suffering. The status quo is certainly not sustainable.

Lord Bach (Lab): My Lords, anniversaries are important events. Certainly we in Britain think so, this being the week of the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta. However, important as they are and must remain, surely it is to the present and the future that we must look. What are Her Majesty's Government doing to improve relations between Turkey and Armenia today?

The Earl of Courtown: My Lords, I could not agree more with the noble Lord—we must look to the future. I reiterate how important it is that the two peoples find some form of reconciliation for the future. I mentioned the various discussions between Turkish and Armenian Chevening alumni and CivilNet TV, which is a media source. In addition we have supported an initiative of our Armenian NGO to publish a book of personal stories from survivors about Turks who saved the lives of Armenians during the massacres and deportations of 1915.