

## Summary report on the press conference

A memorandum to the European institutions was presented yesterday to the press, calling upon the EU to address seriously the continuing discrimination and prejudice towards minorities, and particularly non-Muslim minorities which prevails in Turkey. The speakers argued that the policy of denial of the genocide committed in 1915 on Armenians, Pontic Greeks and Syriacs is an indicator of a continuing problem, and should be addressed as part of Turkey's accession process to the EU.

The issues has so far been sidelined in this context in official circles, with the Commission arguing that the denial of the genocide is a "matter for historians", with no relevance to contemporary relations between Turks and the peoples concerned.

At the press conference, **Dr. Tessa Hofmann**, scholar, writer and human rights activist introduced the initiative by highlighting the Memorandum's 41 signatory organisations' "concerns about very recent and severe violations, on a governmental level, of minority rights in Turkey. [For example] the decrees, issued by the Turkish minister of education, Dr. Hüseyin Çelik, during 2002 and 2003 against Armenian, Syriac and Greek demands for the recognition of the genocide on their ancestors have been described by the Teachers Trade Union of Turkey as chauvinist and racist." "We do not ignore [recent progress in respect for human rights] , but we know that lasting progress depends on profound reforms in Turkey's values as represented in her education system and on the approach towards ethnic and religious minorities by media and other opinion-leaders". Dr Hofmann also detailed evidence of the prevalence of anti-Semitism in Turkey today.

Prominent French historian **Prof. Yves Ternon** focused on Turkey's policy of genocide denial and denied that the EC could remain neutral on the matter: "I am only a historian, and for thirty years I have examined the crime of genocide in its complexity [...] But I am in a position to warn states against complacency towards denialism. Dissimulating a genocide, refusing to qualify this breach of international law, rejecting the evidence is tantamount to taking part in its continuation." Yves Ternon added that he refused to envisage that Turkey might be admitted into the EU without first having recognized the Armenian genocide.

**Hülya Engin**, speaking for the Turkish Human Rights Group TÜDAY, denounced her government's position: "The main obstacle to Turkey joining the EU is not that most of its citizens are Muslims", she stressed. "If Europe is a project, based on democracy, equality and human rights, if it embodies the hope to fight racism, discrimination and genocide, then it has not the right to admit the denial of this crime. If Turkey wants to join Europe, its first task will be to discover for itself the usefulness of a public debate on its past".

Two other speakers stressed the destruction from 1915 onwards, of the Pontic Greeks and the Aramean-speaking Christians. **Michalis Charalambidis**, member of the Central

Committee of the *International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples*, addressed the little known topic of the genocide of Pontic Greeks living in Turkey, while **Johny Messo**, chairman of the *Foundation Study Centre Aramea and UN representative of the Syriac Universal Alliance* explained the critical situation of Syriacs of Turkey. The prejudice towards the remnants of these groups in Turkey is unabated today.

Finally, **Baroness Caroline Cox of Queensbury**, Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords, closed the press conference with a moving call for Turkey to face its past, emphasizing in particular how denial of past genocide feeds insecurity today in the region, as relations between Armenia and Turkey remain conflictual.