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PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DATE: September 29, 2006

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Yerevan, Armenia—On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the Republic of Armenia, the third Armenia-Diaspora Conference was held in Yerevan from September 18th to 20th. Opening statements were made by President Robert Kocharian, His Holiness Karekin II, His Holiness Aram I, President Arkady Ghokassian, and by representatives of many prominent Armenian organizations. The Zoryan Institute was invited to address the Plenary Session of the conference. During the conference, there were five themes concentrated on: Rural Poverty Eradication Program; Nation, State and Identity in the 21st Century; The Mechanics of Diaspora-Homeland Relations: A Two-Way Street; Repatriation and Territory of Common Identity; and A Look at Diaspora 2020. Zoryan's remarks linked these topics by focusing on the Armenian-Turkish relationship. The full transcript of Zoryan's President, K. M. Greg Sarkissian, is reproduced below.

Shared Knowledge of History as a Catalyst for Dialogue

Mr. President, Vehapar Hayrer, and distinguished guests.

While we are gathered here to discuss issues related to the Rural Poverty Eradication Program, particularly in border villages, we have to think also about relations with neighbors on the other side of the border.

Today, many Turks and Armenians continue to see each other only as an unchanging and monolithic enemy, as opposed to their current reality. Genocide recognition continues to be one of the major stumbling blocks in Armenian-Turkish relations, which, we believe, should be established without any preconditions and with a view towards our future, in relation to the other side of the border.

Since the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey in 2002, it has followed an aggressive policy towards membership in the European Union. This meant that Turkey had to introduce numerous changes to its constitution and legal system to bring it in line with EU norms.

Through this initiative, the new government opened the door to free speech on long held taboos, such as linguistic and cultural rights for the Kurds, the rights of non-Turks and non-Muslims, and

the need for Turkish society to deal with and debate its suppressed history, including, as an unwanted by-product, the Armenian Genocide.

These had long been perceived as a threat to the military-bureaucratic elite that constitutes the "Deep State."

This has also caused significant tension among the various elements of the Turkish state, government and civil society. I am sure everyone here is familiar with the indictments of writers Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak, journalist Hrant Dink, and scholar Murat Belge, to name just a few, on the charge of "insulting Turkishness." In May 2005, Justice Minister Cemil Çiçek accused the organizers of the Istanbul Conference on Ottoman Armenians of stabbing the Turkish nation in the back and called them traitors, while the Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gül, announced that he had no problem with the expression of critical opinion and even would be willing to participate in the conference. For their part, the conference organizers declared that "It is high time Turkey's own academics and intellectuals collectively raise voices that differ from the official stance" on the killings of Armenians.

Some feel that trying to force Turkey to recognize the Genocide by external political pressure has radicalized those who are against freedom of speech. Others believe that without external pressure, Turkey would never deal with the Armenian Genocide. Neither option has improved relations between Armenia and Turkey.

It is clear that there is a fervent debate in Turkey today about greater democracy and freedom of expression. There are strong voices that want to reclaim history as a legacy that needs to be recognized and are pressing the government to abolish all obstacles to this process.

There is a clear need and strong desire within Turkey at this time for authoritative information on its suppressed history.

We at the Zoryan Institute see a unique opportunity at this particular juncture, to help provide information for this debate within Turkey. One of the best ways to do this is through systematic scholarly research and the publication of incontestable information in Turkish.

Zoryan, in collaboration with university research centres, such as the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota, is part of a large project called "Creating a Common Body of Knowledge," which is the brainchild of highly respected Turkish scholar, Professor Taner Akçam.

The objective is to provide knowledge that will be shared by Turkish and Armenian civil societies and western scholarship. The project aims to identify, collect, analyze, transliterate, translate, edit and publish, authoritative, universally recognized original archival documents on the history of the events surrounding 1915, in both Turkish and English. This material must be distributed widely in Turkey.

The work is difficult, requiring advanced knowledge of the Gothic German and Ottoman-Arabic scripts, the special diplomatic languages used, and the history and politics of the period. This long-term project will take many years to complete and will require enormous human and financial resources. Despite the difficulty, this work must be done, as denial and distortion of history are a major stumbling block to dialogue, and therefore peace, security and progress in the region. Without dealing with this history, prejudice and hatred will be perpetuated and will

have unforeseen consequences for generations to come.

The more such documents are made available to Turkish society, the more it will be empowered with knowledge to question narratives imposed by the state. Restoring accurate historical memory will benefit not only Turkish, but also Armenian society. Both will be emancipated from the straightjacket of the past. Such a Common Body of Knowledge will lead to an understanding of each other, act as a catalyst for dialogue, and serve as a precursor to the normalization of relations between the two societies.

This work can only be achieved through the systematic and continued efforts of dedicated professionals, with staff and independent scholars and appropriate financial resources. This is such a large undertaking, in terms not only of resources, but also impact, that it must be supported by all Armenians, including the Armenian Government.

Towards this end, we propose that the Diaspora support the Zoryan Institute in the creation of an international Turkish Studies Centre in Armenia in collaboration with major universities here, in Turkey and elsewhere. New scholars, with the necessary expertise, would make a real contribution to the creation of this very important Common Body of Knowledge.

History is a stumbling block for peace and stability in the region. True peace can be achieved only if the nations in the region can talk to each other openly about their past. Therefore, we see education through the Common Body of Knowledge as one of the best ways to alleviate the tension between Turks and Armenians, because it provides a basis of shared knowledge that can counter generations of hostility and lead to mutual understanding and dialogue. In the meantime, we should continue our efforts to normalize relations with Turkey with a positive outlook towards our future, without compromising our past, our memory and our history.

Thank you