

"MELKONIAN MUST REOPEN IF WE WANT DIASPORA TO SURVIVE", FORMER PM TELLS CONFERENCE

Greeks and Turks more concerned with school's fate

A leading member of the Armenian Diaspora believes that if the Melkonian school in Cyprus does not open sometime soon, it will spell disaster for all Armenians around the world.

Speaking at the sixth meeting of the Organizing Committee of the Western Armenian National Council that ended in Nicosia on Sunday, Anoushavan Danielyan said that he would try to convince the AGBU in New York to reopen the historic school. He said it would be to the benefit of present-day Armenia to maintain such a high-caliber educational centre within the European Union and so close to the Middle East and Russia.

"I know what it costs to maintain a school for a community, for all Armenia and Western Armenians. In the Diaspora we must have educational and financial centers to support the Republic of Armenia in every way," Danielyan said.

"If there are 1,200 schools in Armenia, adding one more would simply bring the total to 1,201, while closing a school in the Diaspora will be a national loss," the former prime minister of Nakorno Karapagh said.

Danielyan was commenting on the AGBU decision to reallocate the funds of the Melkonian Trust in order to open a 'Melkonian Summer School' near the capital Yerevan to teach the Armenian language and culture to 400 Diaspora youths for three months each year.

"It would be better to have a school that enjoys the moral and academic support of the friendly government of Cyprus and its people, to which we are all thankful," he added.

But his optimism was countered by some of the six speakers who told the 40-member central committee meeting held at the Holiday Inn in Nicosia that the AGBU never wanted to discuss the school's fate.

"The reason for the closure was neither financial trouble nor falling academic standards. It was their intention to exploit the valuable land the school was sitting on," said one panelist.

Ambassador Nicholas Makris, a member of the Council of Europe committee that drafted the Charter for European Minority Languages, told the conference that the Melkonian must reopen otherwise the Armenian community of Cyprus faces extinction. He said that the government of Cyprus has an obligation to implement the Charter, primarily by reopening of the school.

"The (CoE) committee will be visiting Cyprus again later this year when they will have to assess any progress on the efforts to preserve and safeguard the Armenian language on the island," the former diplomat said.

Dr. Akabie Nassibian-Ekmekdjian, historian and principal of the school in the 1980s gave a historical overview, saying that the Melkonian Education Institute, founded in 1926 as an orphanage for Genocide survivors, has produced hundreds of scientists, academics, artists and authors who are among the leading personalities of the Western Armenian Diaspora. Yeran Kouyoumdjian, editor of a community newspaper, and Armen Urneshlian, an educator from Lebanon, argued that the closure of the Melkonian was not for financial reasons and that it is already having a negative effect on the Armenian Diaspora.

"Schools in the U.S. need tens of Armenian language and history teachers and we are seeing the last of them," Urneshlian added.

Talat's surprise

Vartan Tashjian, former headmaster of the Nareg elementary schools, spoke of his personal experiences and explained how Cypriots in general were angered by the closure and how they supported the struggle to save the school.

"In a chance meeting on Ledra Street after the checkpoint opened, I came face-to-face with (Turkish Cypriot community leader) Mehmet Ali Talat the day he crossed over to our side," Tashjian told the conference delegates.

"I greeted him in Turkish and Talat asked my name. When I told him I was a school teacher he immediately asked, 'What has happened to that school? It's a shame it closed' to which I had to explain that I was not a teacher at the Melkonian. I felt ashamed," Tashjian concluded.

The final speakers of the session included Masis der Parthogh, journalist and alumni association member, who said that the school's closure was planned years in advance with the intention to exploit the land, and Manouk Yildizian, journalist, who explained the legal aspects of community and minority rights in Cyprus and gave an overview of the government's pledge to support the school, both financially and academically.

"Have any of the old established schools in England ever closed for financial reasons? Never, but they are maintained to produce the future leaders of the country, with the occasional one or two prime ministers," Yildizian added.

Present among the community members observing the conference was former AGBU Central Board member Benon Sevan, who said that it was "unfair" that only one side of the argument was heard and that the AGBU came under vicious attack from the panelists.

The session's chairman argued that the AGBU's positions were very clear and that the committee members wanted to hear about the prospects of reopening the historic school.

Dr. Ekmekdjian added that the worldwide Melkonian alumni and friends had always wanted a dialogue, but it was the AGBU that refused for years to discuss keeping the school open.

Asked by the panel to elaborate on the fate of the 25,000 books of the Melkonian library that have supposedly perished and the late 19th century newspapers and documents that were reportedly burned, Sevan, who is also a member of the Melkonian Administration Committee, said he would "come back later with an answer." Last year, the University of Cyprus had asked Armenian Representative in the House, Vartkes Mahdessian, to intervene to help save the historic library and provide a temporary shelter to the books until the school reopened, but the AGBU refused to discuss the matter.

This was the sixth meeting of the Organizing Committee of the Western Armenian National Council that is expected to reconvene later this year to discuss several issues related to the Armenian Diaspora, such as social, community and historic aspects of the Western Armenian language, history and heritage.