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Written statement* submitted by the Syriac Universal Alliance, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 February 2010]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

The Lack of Minority Recognition and Rights in Turkey: The Case of the Forgotten Aramean (Syriac) People and their Appeal to the United Nations

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Shlomo 'alaykhu! Greetings to you, as we say in our Aramaic mother tongue!

On behalf of the Syriac Universal Alliance, I would like to thank the Chairperson for giving neglected and marginalized people a voice in this important forum.

1. Introduction

Dear Chairperson, I represent the genuine indigenous people of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. We are from the Aramean (otherwise known as Syriac) people, a Christian minority group in the Middle East. Not only are we the Indigenous People of Mesopotamia and Lebanon, we are also a Minority Group. We speak a Biblical language and the mother tongue of Jesus Christ. We, the Aramean people, are the true holders and originators of the ancient and sacred Aramaic language.

Now, I could go on and talk about the nearly 3,500 year old history of the Arameans and that they have had no choice but to escape and continue to escape from their homelands to Europe, Australia, North and South America. Instead, however, I will focus on Turkey.

2. Turkey, Minority Rights and the Treaty of Lausanne (1923)

For minority rights, Turkey refers to the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923. Despite the fact that Articles 38 - 43 guaranteed the (inter)national protection and rights of the non - Muslim and non - Turkish nationals, the Arameans were never granted formal recognition by Turkey as a 'minority' as formulated in this Convention. Because of Turkey's arbitrary interpretation and selective use of this covenant, non - Muslim minority status and rights have illegally been restricted to the Greeks, Armenians and Jews. Consequently, the Arameans could never enjoy their basic human rights, but instead had to suffer in many ways from discrimination. For example, on paper the Arameans were granted "an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein" (Article 40). In practice, however, Aramean teachers have been imprisoned for teaching Aramaic. In more recent times, state officials had even attempted to permanently close down ancient Christian monasteries such as Saffron in Mardin (1978) and Mor Gabriel in Midyat (1997) for teaching Aramaic.

3. Illegal expropriations by Turkish Government

Established in 1983, the Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA) is a global umbrella organization representing the various Aramaic national federations in the continents of Europe, the USA, Australia and the Middle East. The SUA is the widely acknowledged voice of the Aramean people whose interests and needs it aims to serve, defend and promote. It is the only Aramaic-speaking Non-Governmental Organization with a special consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

In 2009, delegations of the SUA attended several court cases faced by the Mor Gabriel Monastery (founded in 397 AD) and visited many villages in Southeast Turkey to understand their plight. What the SUA has seen and heard there from the locals was truly appalling and alarming. Evidence clearly shows that there are a multitude of Aramean villages in the region whose lands have already been and continue to be expropriated.

In almost every single Aramean village in Southeast Turkey, the three major land problems our people face at the hands of the following expropriators can be briefly summed up as follows:

- A. Boundary Lines Cases: Unlawfully, the Arameans have lost significant amounts of their rightful land to typically Kurdish neighbors, all of whom entered this historically Christian Aramean region only fairly recently.
- B. Forestry Land Cases: Unlawfully, the Department of Forestry has seized and occupied huge amounts of land and gave it to others (again, typically Kurdish neighbors) who have no historical or land title right to the land.
- C. State Treasury Land Cases: Unlawfully, the Ministry of State has seized “parcels” of land in almost every Aramean village in order to use them for the economic benefit of Turkey. However, there has been no compensation paid to rightful owners of such land, there has been no consultation with land owners and land has been used for other purposes, including the building of mosques or the allocation of land to neighboring villages (again, typically Kurdish people) for their economic benefit.

4. SUA’s Recommendations adopted by Council of Europe (Resolution 1704)

On Wednesday 27 January 2010, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Resolution 1704 that calls upon Turkey to seriously address the issue of minority rights of its Non-Muslim citizens.

This recognition came in response to a formal memorandum (with recommendations) issued by the SUA, requesting the Council of Europe to pay heed to the neglected Aramean people in Turkey. Three of the SUA’s recommendations were almost literally adopted by the Council of Europe. With respect to Turkey, therefore, “the Assembly urges the Turkish authorities to:

- 19.6. ensure that the Syriac Orthodox monastery of Mor Gabriel, one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world, founded in 397 AD, is not deprived of its lands, and that it is protected in its entirety. The Assembly expresses equal concern about the current status of the unlawful appropriation of significant amounts of land historically and legally belonging to a multitude of other ancient Syriac [Aramean] monasteries, churches and proprietors in Southeast Turkey;
- 19.7. recognise, promote and protect the Syriac [Aramean] people as a minority, which is indigenous to south-east Turkey, in conformity with the Lausanne Treaty and related international conventions which guarantee their fundamental human rights and dignity; this shall include, but shall not be limited to, officially developing their education and carrying out religious services in their Aramaic native language.
- 20. The Assembly asks the Government Turkey to report back on the progress made on each point in paragraphs 16, 18 and 19 of the present resolution by February 2011.”

- Significantly, in Article 16 the Assembly encourages Turkey to sign and ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities as well as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

5. SUA's Appeal to the United Nations, the successor of the League of Nations

Paradoxically, Turkey obtained its legal status in international law by referring to this Treaty, while concurrently disregarding the undeniable existence of non - Turkish and non-Muslim minorities within its borders that were equally granted lawful status by this very same Treaty and a number of other international conventions.

Indeed, officially the Arameans do not exist within Turkish society, despite the fact that they are native to Southeast Turkey. This is a critical issue of great proportions which has not been adequately addressed to date. Hence it is both just and reasonable, and even necessary for the future survival of Arameans in their historic homeland, to have the United Nations urge Turkey to recognize them as an indigenous people and as a minority according to the Lausanne Treaty. For minority rights can only follow logically after minority recognition.

Referring to Articles 38-43, which legally acknowledge the Arameans as well, Article 44 of the Lausanne Treaty unambiguously states: "Turkey agrees that, in so far as the preceding Articles of this Section affect non-Moslem nationals of Turkey, these provisions constitute obligations of international concern and shall be placed under the guarantee of the League of Nations."

Explaining that Turkey can be held accountable in case of violations, the same Article emphasizes: "Turkey agrees that any Member of the Council of the League of Nations shall have the right to bring to the attention of the Council any infraction or danger of infraction of any of these obligations, and that the Council may thereupon take such action and give such directions as it may deem proper and effective in the circumstances."

The United Nations is the legal successor of the League of Nations. Since the ratification of this Treaty in 1923, the Arameans have never enjoyed the rights that were guaranteed to them under the Lausanne Treaty. Turkey has violated their fundamental human rights in many different ways and on numerous occasions. Yet, for one reason or another, not one Member State of the League of Nations or the United Nations has ever brought these serious infractions "to the attention of the Council." Turkey was and still is bold enough to ignore the existence of the native Aramean people, whose history in Turkey by far is much older and better substantiated than the Turks.

Thus, we call upon the United Nations to follow the excellent example as recently shown by the Council of Europe in its adoption of Resolution 1704, which justly advances human rights and minority rights in Turkey. We appeal in particular to the co-signers of this Treaty, viz. the British Empire, France, Italy and Japan to invite Turkey to officially recognize the Aramean people.

Thank you for your attention.

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