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Newsletter

The Voice of the Syriacs



CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

Dear readers,

The Syrian case, it is resuming to be crucial issue of the world's agenda. The Middle East, in every century has got through period of transition and heavy wars. Aftermath of the Lausanne agreement in 1923, the Syriac people had been left outside of the change region and developments which happened in the Middle East. They couldn't benefit from these developments neither as nation and nor as Christians. Now a days, the Arab Spring which begun in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, continues in Syria more than two years. The Syrian uprising turned into a bloody war and caused hundreds and thousands victim across Syria.

As ESU, we are aware of difficulties and the obscure future for Syriac people. Neither Western powers and nor the local powers do not protect them. They let them out of the process. The representation of Syriac people in every level is weak or neglected. Once again the agenda is about the Sunni, the Shia and the Kurds. We have already seen this film in Iraq. As ESU we demand from the Western powers to consider and to understand the problems and the circumstances of the Syriac Christians in Syria.

As ESU we started a campaign to help our people in Syria. This campaign consists of collecting food, clothes, blanket etc. to serve the people to continue their life in Syria. Our campaign has begun 15th of March and will continue until 15th of April. We expect each kind of help and donations so that hand in hand we can protect and help the kids, the women, the elderly, the sick and people in need.

In this occasion, we would like to congratulate the head of the Catholic Church his Beatitude Pope Francis I. who has been elected as the new leader of Vatican and the whole Catholic in the world. Our expectation from the new Pope Francis I. is to awake the Christian world on the situation of the Christians of the Middle East. We call him to support spiritually and materially and to pay attention to those Christians as his Beatitude pay attention to the other Catholics faithful.

In the past several days, the Turkish government launches a process with the Kurds and especially with the Kurdish Worker Party (PKK) to solve the problems and the Kurdish issue. In our opinion, this is a significant step towards the security of the people who are living in Turkey. But on the other hand, the Turkish government does not give the impression of being honest and sincere towards the Syriacs. Because it takes the Syriac issue as a religious community and it is trying to solve the problems with the religious leaders. That shows the approaches of the Turkish government are avoiding the identity of the Syriacs and it wants to accept them as Turkish Christians. But as ESU we do not accept this approach toward our people and the denial of our identity that has a history of more than 6000 years old. We appeal the European Union to be aware of this richness of Syriac history and tradition does not be vanished from Turkey.

As ESU in last 3 months, we organized activities such as conference in the France Senate about Syria. Also we made several activities to celebrate the World Women day and to promote the Syriac women in the community. Furthermore we held some presentations, conferences and parties in different European countries and we prepared the activities to commemorate the Sayfo 1915 martyrs in April.

Lahdo Hobil
President of European Syriac Union

SYRIAC CONFERENCE IN FRENCH SENATE



On 13, February, Syriac people raised their voices in the French Senate concerning the latest situation in Syria and their expectations and demands from new Syria and from French public opinion.

The Institute Assyro-Chaldeen-Syriaque located in Paris organized a conference at the French Senate with the collaboration of European Syriac Union, ESU about the ongoing conflict in Syria and its consequences on vulnerable Syriac Christians.

Since the uprising in Syria one of the most vulnerable groups, Syriac people, have been affected and seek the refuge at the neighbor countries.

Under the patronage of Senator Christiane Kammermann, the conference gathered different personalities, experts, and individuals to discuss the situation from different angles and providing effective solution to the current situation.

The conference was the first example in the French Senate and also first meeting for Syriac people to deliver their messages in French Senate.

Bassam Ishak leading opposition figure and the President of Syrian Syriac National Council mentioned the difficulty on the ground and especially for Syriac and Christians who had been caught between two dilemmas. Bassam Ishak stated that, "the regime have killed and continue to killing the civilians and people in Syria while destroying culture, social fabric and institutions in Syria. At the same time, the attitude of some oppo-

sition groups in not accepted. Syriac people and Christians are not enough and truly represented."

Bassam Ishak also insisted about the Islamist groups in Syria and their sectarian attitudes toward Christians.

Vice-President of Syriac Union Party in Syria Said Malki had insisted about the vulnerability of Syriac people in Syria and the lack of support for them.

Said Malki highlighted that, "all groups in Syria receive important and vital support from different countries. Kurds receive their support from Iraqi Kurdistan, Sunnites are supported by Gulf monarchies and Alawites find their help from Iran. Contrary to this blatant reality, Christians are not protected and nobody support them."

Said Malki also declared that the objective of Christians is not to attack but simply to defend themselves against all harassments and attacks.

Syria uprising started on March 2011 against dictatorial regime of Bashar Al Assad.

People in Syria raised their voices for justice, freedom, dignity and democratic principles to be accorded for the whole society. Since the beginning of uprising, thousands of civilians had been killed and thousands had fled the country to neighbor countries. While the conflict affects all segment of the Syrian society one of the vulnerable groups in Syria are Syriac people. Syriac people who fled the country have found their refuge in Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. There are also some Syriac people who try all means and way to reach to European countries.

Syriac Union Party in Syria is political party which seeks to advance the situation of Syriac people in Syria and bring their problems and demands in front of the regional and international community.

The party has worked deeply in Syria during the uprising and it had been active with the humanitarian aid for Syriac people in difficulty.

Among the other speakers, Randa Kassis, opposition figure stated the necessity for political solution in Syria in order to stopping the killing of civilians and the ongoing bloodshed.

On the other hand, the President of l'Oeuvre d'Orient, Pascal Gollnisch highlighted the importance of the presence of Christians in Syria and he declared that Christians have been active at the cultural, social and economic aspect of Syrian society and their disappearance from the Middle East will have enormous consequences.

During the final statement the President of Institute of Assyro-Chaldeen-Syriaque Agnes Ide stated the inquietude of Syriac and Christians about the Iraqi syndrome which left great consequences on the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian people in Iraq. She stated that the presence of Christians and Syriac in Syria is fundamental. Regional and international actors have to take this point into consideration.

INTERVIEW WITH BASSAM ISHAK, PRESIDENT OF SYRIAC NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYRIA

Syria uprising nearly two years occupies the public attention in Middle East countries and as well at the international level. The ongoing uprising has turned into bloody conflict, which made thousands of casualties and one of the biggest humanitarian crises. Despite numerous attempts the international community failed to reach a consensus, which will end the current conflict. While the conflict ravage all segment of society, Syriac people also have been affected. We are providing an exclusive interview with Mr. Bassam Ishak, opposition figure and human rights activist. At the same time, Mr. Ishak is the President of Syrian Syriac National Council.

Syria uprising is entering to second year with thousands of casualties and human tragedies. How do you see and analyse current situation inside Syria?

The revolution which started through civil demonstrations by Syrians seeking individual freedom has turned into an armed confrontation because of the regime's brutality against peaceful Syrians. The Free Syrian Army and armed revolutionists have made an impressive progress on the ground as they have been able to free more than half the country and they are knocking on the doors of Bashar Assad in Damascus. It's true that the Assad army is better equipped and by far has enjoys superior weaponry but the armed revolutionists enjoy high moral and are making progress, slow at times, but sustainable progress. I believe it's just a matter of time before the regime fall in Damascus and the Syrian people will not be denied. Yes as you mentioned the fall, of the regime, will come at a great price for Syrians but freedom never comes cheaply. I also believe that the struggle for freedom will continue for Syrians even after Assad is gone in order to overcome a culture of political monopoly. For now, the obstacle is the military forces of Bashar, in the future the obstacles will come in political forms, but the Syrian people are determined to win their full freedom and to live in their country in dignity and eventually they will reach their goals regardless of the obstacles. As I said earlier, people who are willing to sacrifice in this heroic fashion will not be denied.

While the current situation affect all segments of Syrian society, Christians of Syria had been at the top of international agenda. What is the point of view of Christians regarding Syrian Uprising?

Just like every segment of the Syrian society the Christians of Syria are divided between those who support the regime and those who support the revolution. According to objective data a slight majority of the Christians support the revolution. Those Christians who still support Assad do it out of fear for their future, they are afraid of what might be or who might

be in power after Assad. They also feel insecure given the recent experience of Iraqi Christians post Saddam Hussein's regime who became target of religious violence and many of them were forced to leave. We also need to point out that more and more Syrians including Christians are shifting to the side of the revolution given the regime brutality and its lack of ability to provide a political solution. Many Christians who were part of the regime for a long time have fled the country. The regime, after realizing that it has lost its grip on the Christians, has turned against them, for example, in the province of Hassakeh, the regime has given its Shabbiha the green light to intimidate Syriac Christians to force them to flee the country. Many Syriac Christian members of the military have fled to neighboring countries because they are not willing to die for Assad and some have defected to the free Syrian Army. I believe that Assad will fall like every other brutal dictator did, but the Syrian Syriac Christians and their unique identity will continue to strive in the land of their forefathers

You are personally leading opposition figure and at the same time President of Syrian Syriac National Council. When and why you have established the council? What are the objectives of Syriac Council?

The Council was established on September 8, 2012, in Istanbul. We chose Istanbul for many reasons, Turkey and Syria share a significant Syriac population that lives on its historical land, we also wanted to send a message that we desired to open a new page of relations between the Syrians and democratic Turkey and we wanted to express to Turkey, as Syrian Syrians, our appreciation of its strong support for the Syrian people's revolution in his struggle for freedom and democracy. During times of uncertainty its natural for special identity people to feel insecure and to seek to emphasize their identity, this was a significant motivation to establish the Syriac council. We wanted to confirm our identity and encourage our people not to give up their presence in their historical land. We also wanted to express support for the revolution and make the point that Syrians are part of it. We wanted to send a message that our forefathers identity is dear to us and significant to our lives as Syrians and that we are entrenched in Syrian history and present and that we intend be part of the democratic Syria of the future which Muslim and Christians, Alawites and Sunnis, Arabs, Syrians and Kurds aspire for.

As international community failed to reach to a consensus regarding the conflict in your opinion what is the best solution for Syrian crisis?

I have a brief answer for this question. I believe, that the best solution for the Syrian

crises is to minimize outside political interference, and competition for influence, and to empower Syrians to form together their new social and political contract. I am not saying that the international community has no role to play or that its not needed. The opposite, the international community has a responsibility to help the Syrian find a solution but their own solution that answer the needs of Syrians first.



As President for S.S.N.C what are the demands of Syriac people in the future Syria?

The Syrians, like every other identity community in Syria desire to live in a country that recognizes and respects their identity. A country that is based on citizenship where all citizens are equal, regardless of sex, religion, sect, nationality, or origin. A pluralistic country, that is inclusive of all of its members. All enjoy the same rights and share the same responsibilities. A Syriac or a Kurd, a man or a woman, should be able to compete and reach the highest political office if they possess the needed qualities and are chosen by the Syrian people. This may sound idealistic but this is the real aspiration of the revolution as it started, I was there the demonstrators went out and died seeking individual freedom and dignity for all Syrians with no exception. That is what I want to and what I struggle for, for all Syrians, including Syrians.

What the future holds for Syrian people altogether?

I am an opposition figure, I am biased, I believe the revolution and the Syrian people are on the right side of history, and they can't be denied the country they have dreaming and sacrificing for that is democratic and pluralist and modern. I heard many experts argue when the Arab Spring began that it will not reach Syria, the same experts later argued that the revolution was near finished, and they argue now that the revolution is at in impasse. They don't know the Syrian people how determined, resilient, and focused on reaching their goal, we maybe diverse like the colors of a rainbow but we are one.

ESU LETTER TO HRW CONCERNING KILLINGS OF SYRIAC PEOPLE IN TURABDIN

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

European Syriac Union, ESU informed Human Rights Watch, HRW about extra-judicial killings of Syriac people in the south-east region of Turkey during the 1990s. During this dark period nearly 50 Syriac people had been victim of unknown assailants killings and resulting with great exodus of Syriac people from the region namely Turabdin.

During the 1990s while the conflict made rage at the region between state forces and PKK, despite their neutral stance Syriac people had been target of shadowy groups stated at the letter of ESU and highlighting that, "at the same time and region, Syriac people were also present and they had been victim of the conflict of two sides despite their neutral stance. Well-known Syriac personalities among them doctors, former district

mayor, businessmen had been killed by unknown assailants and Syriac villages had been damaged or fully evacuated. Following the intensification of the conflict in the region, Syriac people were easy target for the shadowy groups. Due to lack of juridical and security mechanisms, deep groups with strong ties had been developed and established the reign of terror against the people of the region. During the 1990s, while the conflict and reign of fear were at utmost point, Syriac people without any reason had been victim of killings. Taking account of their little quantity, killings of Syriac personalities left irrevocable consequences on the presence of Syriac people in the region. Following these murders, Syriac people started to flee abroad massively to European countries while leaving behind all properties, assets and other valuable richness."

Syriac people had been important and crucial element of the social fabric in the region while preserving their culture, language, heritage and traditions despite all obstacles and difficulties. They had been active at the construction of the multi-cultural sphere and they had been involved actively at the social and daily life of the region.

Meanwhile, ESU letter draw attention to the killings and stated, "Between the years

of 1987 to 1998, nearly 50 Syriac people had been killed by unknown assailant(s). Taking account of the current discussion over the extra-judicial killings in Turkey and as your above mentioned report point out, the time for accountability is crucial and vital for the justice to take place.

Syriac people who had been victim of these attacks were well-known personalities among their local population regardless their different identity and belief. All victims were well placed among the Syriac people and among them there was doctor, former mayor, businessmen and sometimes Syriac tourists who only desired to visit the region.

The ongoing Cemal Temizöz trial can lead to important revelations concerning killings of Syriac people at İdil district near to Cizre. The killings that happen during the 1990s create an atmosphere of fear, insecurity and these caused to great exodus of Syriac people from the region."

Finally, ESU had kindly requested from HRW to monitor, investigate about the extra-judicial killings of Syriac people and push authorities to find perpetrators of these inhuman crimes. ESU also highlighted the importance of the full collaboration and support regarding this important issue.

8 MARCH INTERNATIONAL WOMEN DAY



On the occasion of the 8th of March, the international day of the women, the Bethnahrin Women Union has organised different events in Sweden, Switzerland and Germany.

The Bethnahrin Women Union is celebrating this important day since years with different events in different countries and cities whole

around Europe.

The goal of this activities is, to operate on international level about the importance of this day for the women and especially for the Syriac Women.

At the seminar in Södertälje / Sweden, where about 70 women participated, the main topic was the role of Syriac women within the Syriac society.

Regarding to latest developments in our native homeland Syria, the Bethnahrin Women Union pointed out the importance of womens participation to social, humanitarian and political activities.

Another seminar with the same topic was held in Västerås, which was hosted by the St. Eliyo church of the city.

At the seminar in Hamburg / Germany, which was hosted by the St. Maria and St. Shmuni

church, the Bethnahrin Women Union discussed with about more than 65 participants the intercultural exchange, the linguistic and social integration of the women in Europe.

In all seminars the speakers on behalf of the Bethnahrin Women Union pointed out, that the woman is an integral part of Christianity, so that she has to take care of the fututre of Christianity in Middle East.

In Switzerland the Bethnahrin Women Union organized a festivity in Wil. More than 350 people participated this event.

During this festivity the representative of the Bethnahrin Women Union made a speech about the importance of participation of women to organizations and institutions.

Within this speech the role of women within the Syriac people was pointed out.

The Voice of the Syrians

IMPRINT

Information bulletin about the social position of the Syrians in and outside the Middle East.

It appears periodically, published by the European Syriac Union (ESU) in Brussels-Belgium.

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SYRIAC PEOPLE CELEBRATED AKITU, 1st APRIL



Syriac people in celebrated the New Year, Akitu in Sweden, Turabdin and in Syria. Akitu is celebrated among Syriac people on 1st April as the arrival of the Spring. Syriac people have long history which goes back 6000 years in Mesopotamia and have important contributions to the social fabric of the region.

European Syriac Union, ESU organized a mass event in Sweden for the celebration of the Akitu. ESU activity in Sweden took place on 29 March and the event had great success. Syriac people in Sweden participated to the event massively and they had great moments of happiness during the event of the Akitu. Suroyotv also had broadcasted the event on live to the Syriac people around the world. Sweden has important Syriac diaspora and Syriac people are present in every stage of Swedish society and they contribute largely to the Swedish society.

The event of Akitu had rich program of large choice of singers, theatre shows, traditional costumes defile among others. The singers from different countries of Europe entertain people during the night with their traditional sings. On the other hand, the traditional hand craft apparatus had been exhibited to the large public. Around 700 Syrians were present to the event among them young, elders, and children.

On behalf ESU, Vice-Chairman Neriman Özgün welcomed all attendees and presented a speech concerning the Akitu, New Year. Neriman Özgün highlighted the importance of cultural and traditional values especially in diaspora, their importance for cultural formation and

their transmission to the future generations. She declared that, "while our world is at turning point from many angles and Middle East in turmoil, it is vital to be able to celebrate such important days. Syriac people are present in the Middle East countries and they are facing great dilemmas. We have also an important responsibility toward them and help them during harsh days. For the moment Syriac people in Syria our priority."

Akitu festivities also took place in Turabdin, Southeast Turkey, region which is the homeland of Syriac people. Turabdin region is rich with the Syriac heritage and the presence of Syriac people in Turabdin is vital for multi cultural aspect of the region. The Federation of Syriac Associations hosted the event in the village of Kafro. Syriac people from different villages gathered to the festivities and they enjoyed moments with the singers arrived from Syria.

The President of Federation of Syriac Associations Evgil Türker presented a speech during the event and highlighted the importance of the day. Evgil Türker said that Turkey is passing very delicate process in order to solve Kurdish issue and we support this process which will bring more stable conditions. He declared that "Syriac people are indigenous people of Mesopotamia and Turabdin. We are present in these lands since centuries. During every century and history we made our contributions in the field of culture, economy, and daily life and so on. We attached too much importance to our cultural and traditional values and it is our responsibility to pass them to

the next generations."

Evgil Türker also highlighted the ongoing talks between state and Kurdish side in order to solve long date Kurdish issue and he said that we ask also to be part of this process. Evgil Türker declared that Syriac people also want to be part and present in this process and we want to be present in the "wise men commission" in order to bring our asset on the table.

During last month Turkish government had started a new process with the Kurdish side in order to solve Kurdish issue. The ongoing process has vital importance for the democracy and civil liberties in Turkey.

On the other hand, despite all difficulties and dilemmas Syriac people had celebrated Akitu also in Syria, Al-Qamishli. Syriac people are densely present in Al-Qamishli and in Syria. The event host Syriac people in the city and there was large program for the event.

Syriac people are native people of Mesopotamia and today they are dispersed in different Middle East countries. During the centuries they contributed massively to the present societies. They made large contributions in literature, medicine, culture. On the other hand, with the political oppressions and denial policies they had been target of massacres and discriminative policies. Consequently, Syriac people seek refuge outside of the region and they fled to Western countries.

ESU is working for the promotion of Syriac people rights and demands. ESU accord great importance to the cultural, traditional and educational values of Syriac people and it is active in these fields.