

Government vows to bring tourists, jobs to Gyumri



Armenia - Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan tours Gyumri's old town, 3Feb2017.

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Defense Ministers of Armenia, Iran discuss issues on bilateral, regional agenda

Minister of Defense of the Republic of Armenia Vigen Sargsyan, who arrived in Tehran on January 30 evening at official invitations of his Iranian counterpart met with Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan to exchange views on bilateral, regional and international issues, Mehr News Agency reports.

During the meeting, Iran's Dehghan pointed to commonalities as well as cultural and historical bonds between Iran and Armenia saying "for having joint borders with 15 countries, Islamic Republic of Iran ranks second in the world as regards number of neighbors."

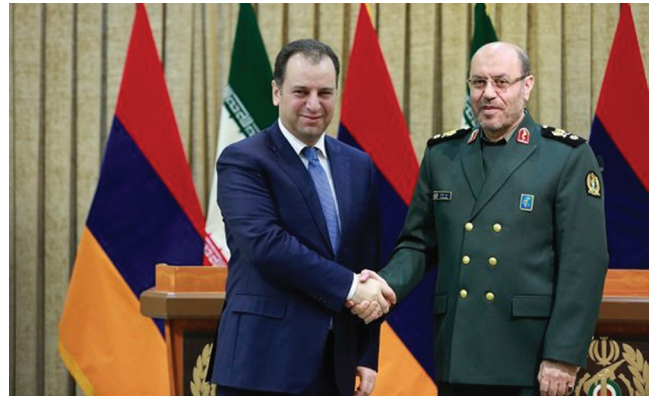
"Iran has always sought best relations with neighbors and has suffered great losses in the attempt to settle peace, stability and sustainable security inside the region," he added

He reiterated that present difficulties could be resolved only through dialogue and negotiation in a peaceful way. "Exercising force in settling regional issues proved to be futile and Iran will spare no effort to address ongoing problems," Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan added.

"Continuous and definite fight against terrorism and roots of insecurity and instability remains as principal policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," underlined Dehghan.

Iran's defense minister referred to the growing trend in bilateral cooperation between Iran and Armenia in all fields and voiced Iran's readiness to further boost mutual collaborations.

Armenian Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan touched upon the importance of Iran's outstanding position in the region and the world,



emphasizing his country's eagerness to bolster relations with Tehran.

Sargsyan also called for development of defense relations with Iran asserting that his visit could pave the path for relevant collaboration.

"We are against all tensions in the region and disputes among neighboring states," said the official appreciating Iran's efforts in relieving tensions.

He hailed Iran's role in resolving Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, reiterating that the issue has no military solution.

At the end of his remarks, Vigen Sargsyan underscored that Armenia share Iran's views in the fight against terrorism and voiced his country's willingness to launch cooperation in this regard.

Armenia, Iran keen on developing security cooperation

In a meeting in Tehran with Armenia's Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hailed the expanding relations between Tehran and Yerevan, hoping that the ties would contribute to regional peace and stability.

The parties attached importance to the expansion of cooperation between the

two countries in the field of security. Issues related to the reinforcement of bilateral cooperation, the deepening of friendly ties between the two peoples were discussed. Reference was made to regional issues, as well.

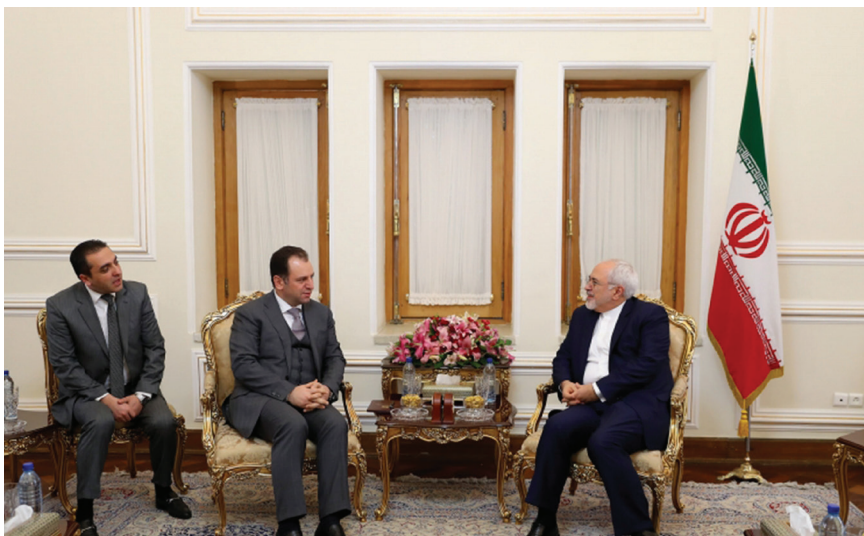
"In today's world where extremist tendencies are growing in the name of different religions, the ties between Iran and

Armenia can be exemplary," Zarif said. "We are witnessing the growth of relations in different fields," he added.

Sargsyan, for his part, said Armenia attaches great significance to its ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. He also referred to a recent visit to Yerevan by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, saying there have been new developments in the bilateral ties since the trip.

The interlocutors praised the cooperation in different spheres and attached importance to the deepening of relations. They also emphasized the importance of regional peace and security as a prerequisite for the consistent development of the countries in the region.

Vigen Sargsyan briefed Javad Zarif on the situation at the line of contact between the armed forces of Nagorno Karabakh and the OSCE Minsk Group efforts towards the settlement of the conflict. The parties stressed the need to solve the issue in a peaceful way through negotiations and reiterated their commitment to contribute to the establishment of peace and stability.



After preventing attack on Talish, Karabakh Army captures Azeri soldier



The Azerbaijani forces undertook an infiltration attempt in the northern (Talish) direction of the line of contact with the Karabakh forces at about 15:00 on February 1, taking advantage of the foggy weather conditions, the NKR Defense Ministry informs.

The front divisions of the NKR Defense Army were quick to spot the advancement of the Azeri Special Forces and resort to preventive measures to force the rival back.

The Armenian troops have taken an Azeri soldier hostage. The private of the Azeri army is identified as Elnut Huseynzade (born in Barda in 1995).

The NKR Defense Ministry reports that at least one Azeri serviceman has been wounded in clashed. The information has been confirmed by the Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani Defense Ministry denied, however, launching any incursions at this and other sections of "the line of contact" around Karabakh. In a statement cited by Azerbaijani news agencies, it confirmed that Huseynzade served in the Azerbaijani army but claimed that he was demobilized "some time ago" because of repeated violations of "military discipline" and failure to report for duty.

However, Huseynzade's mother told the

Azerbaijani news service Istipress.com on Thursday that he remained an active duty serviceman up until his capture. She said her son became a contract soldier after completing a two-year compulsory military service in 2015.

A Karabakh Armenian army spokesman, Senor Hasratyan, shrugged off Baku's denials on Thursday, saying that the Azerbaijani military is "ready to abandon its soldier." Hasratyan insisted that Huseynzade was armed and wore an Azerbaijani army uniform when he was captured in no-man's land near Talish.

The village was severely damaged by Azerbaijani shelling during four-day hostilities around Karabakh in April 2016. Davit Babayan, a senior official in Stepanakert, said that the botched Azerbaijani incursion was aimed at hampering the ongoing reconstruction of local houses.

Babayan would not say whether Huseynzade will be freed and repatriated anytime soon. "It's too early to talk about that," he said.

"[Huseynzade's] security and health is not in danger," added the Karabakh official. "His parents and relatives should not worry."

The Defense Ministry in Baku also reported that another Azerbaijani soldier, Rauf Isayev, was shot and wounded by Armenian forces on February 1. It did not specify where the shooting occurred.

The Karabakh army claimed to have "inflicted losses" on the Azerbaijani side during the Talish incident.

Azerbaijan puts itself in a ridiculous situation by refusing from own soldier - Sergey Minasyan



"The infiltration attempt undertaken by the Azerbaijani forces comes to reinforce the importance of implementa-

tion of the investigation mechanism at the line of contact," Deputy Director of the Caucasus Institute Sergey Minasyan told a press conference today.

"The talks about the need for the mechanism intensified especially after the April military actions," he said. "The Minsk Group Co-Chairs and Armenia have similar approaches towards the issue," Minasyan added.

"Azerbaijan's position on the OSCE platform is rather vulnerable, and this incident can serve as a reason for a stricter attitude towards the country," he noted.

Sergey Minasyan does not rule out that

Azerbaijan will again be trying to ignite tensions parallel to the devaluation of Azerbaijani manat and aggravation of the social-economic conditions. Therefore, he says, the Armenian side should be ready to make more effective use of the restraining mechanisms should Azerbaijan try to undertake non-standard military or military-political actions.

As for the Azeri claims that the soldier captured by the Armenian forces had been expelled from the armed forces, Sergey Minasyan says "Azerbaijan has thus put itself in a hard and ridiculous position."

Government vows to bring tourists, jobs to Gyumri

Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan promoted on Friday a \$10 million plan to refurbish Gyumri's historic old town which the Armenian government says will greatly stimulate economic activity in the impoverished city.

The tourism-oriented program drawn up by Armenia's Central Bank and a private charity at Karapetyan's initiative calls for capital repairs of the two main streets in Gyumri's central Kumayri district mainly constructed in the 19th century. This will supposedly attract many Armenian and foreign tourists.

Officials said old houses to be reconstructed there over the next two years will offer about 8,000 square meters of commercial space to businesspeople interested in opening shops, restaurants and centers for traditional arts or handicrafts.

Accompanied by several dozen entrepreneurs, Karapetyan visited Armenia's second largest city to tour its old district and attend the official presentation of the tourism development plan. He said Kumayri's renovation will be financed from a \$10 million investment fund that will have mostly private contributors.

"We regard the establishment of the fund and the street repairs as an important catalyst for business processes here," Karapetyan said at the presentation. "The state will stand by this fund with all its budgetary and financial instruments."

"As a former businessman who was very successful in business, I want to assure you that the invested funds will be recouped quickly," he told entrepreneurs.

Speaking to journalists afterwards, the premier, in office since September, said he and his family will invest \$500,000 of their money in the project.

Some local reporters voiced skepticism about the effort, saying that previous Armenian government failed to make good on their pledges to breathe a new life into Gyumri. "What kind of a guarantee do you want from me?" an irritated Karapetyan replied. He insisted that his cabinet is serious about the project.

Gyumri has still not fully recovered from a catastrophic 1988 earthquake that killed 25,000 people and left hundreds of thousands of others homeless in this and other parts of northwestern Armenia. The city has long had one of the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the country.

The upcoming launch of the tourism development project should coincide with a large-scale reconstruction of Gyumri streets and roads which have been in an increasingly poor condition in the last few years.

The Yerevan government and the municipal administration secured last year \$25 million in funding from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development for the planned street repairs. The money will also be used for installing new and energy-efficient lighting and upgrading the municipal drainage infrastructure.

By Satenik Kaghzvantian

Abrahamian Allies Replaced In Key Posts

The Armenian authorities replaced on February 2 two close allies of former Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan who held key positions in his native Ararat province.

Ararat's governor, Rubik Abrahamyan, and the head of the regional branch of the governing Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), Karine Poghosyan, stepped down this week following the ex-premier's decision to quit the HHK.

Poghosyan, who is related to Hovik Abrahamyan, as well as the latter's brother Henrik and 11 local officials also terminated their membership in President Serzh Sargsyan's party.

Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan's cabinet appointed businessman Aramayis Grigoryan as Ararat's new governor at a weekly meeting in Yerevan. Grigoryan said that he was offered to take up the post

earlier in the day. "The prime minister spoke to me this morning and I accepted his offer," he told reporters.

Grigoryan, who is based in a village in Ararat, already ran the province south of Yerevan from 2013-2014. He served as Armenia's environment minister from 2014-2016.

The HHK's new regional leader, Alik Sargsyan, is also a former Ararat governor. A retired police officer, he was the chief of the Armenia police from 2008-2011 and was later appointed as a presidential adviser.

"I'm not replacing Hovik Abrahamian, I'm replacing the head of the regional [HHK] chapter," Sargsyan told RFE/RL's Armenian service (Azatutyun.am). "I'm going to do my job. Time will tell how successful I will be," he said.

Sargsyan declined to comment on his ability to offset the impact of Hovik Abrahamian's exit on the ruling party's performance in the area in the April 2 parliamentary elections.

The former prime minister and his extended family have long dominated the political and economic life in much of Ararat. Thanks to his clout, Abrahamyan has also managed the HHK's parliamentary and presidential election campaigns for almost a decade.

Abrahamian decided to quit the HHK more than four months after he was sacked as prime minister. He has still not given a clear reason for the move. Some Armenian commentators have speculated that he quit because he sees no prospect of being again appointed to a senior position anytime soon.



Minsk Group Co-Chairs ready to organize a meeting between Armenian, Azerbaijani FMs



The OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs are ready to organize a meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in mid-February, Russian Co-Chairs Igor Popov told TASS.

“The OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs have agreed to hold separate consultations with the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in mid-February,” he said.

“If the Ministers show interest, we’ll organize a meeting between them,” Popov added.

Besides, he said, according to an agreement reached in St. Petersburg last summer, consultations continue in Russia-Azerbaijan-Armenia format.

“Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has recently discussed the Karabakh issue with Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov. As soon as necessary conditions are created, there will be a possibility of a trilateral meeting,” the Ambassador added.

Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian told a press conference on January 31 that “Armenia never refuses from any meeting.”

“The meeting with the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister will take place, if the Azrei side agrees,” Minister Nalbandian said.

Belarus leader demands blogger`s extradition to Azerbaijan

Ignoring warnings from Russia and Armenia, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on February 3 told law-enforcement authorities in Belarus to extradite to Azerbaijan a Russian-Israeli blogger arrested by them because of his trips to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Lukashenko defended the December 14 arrest and said the blogger, Alexander Lapshin, should have been handed over to Baku “long ago.”

“Azerbaijan appealed to Interpol, not to us,” the Interfax news agency quoted him as telling a news conference. “We detained him in accordance with Interpol’s decision and must hand him over to Azerbaijan in accordance with all laws and regulations.”

The Azerbaijani authorities say Lapshin illegally entered “occupied territories of Azerbaijan” when he visited Karabakh in 2011 and 2012 without their permission. The 40-year-old, who holds Israeli, Russian and Ukrainian passports, gave detailed accounts of the trips on his Russian-language blog.

A court in Minsk upheld last week Belarusian prosecutors’ decision to authorize Lapshin’s extradition. He appealed against that ruling.

“They say that he appealed but I’m sure that the court will still back our decision because it’s legal,” said Lukashenko.

The Belarusian leader, who has faced strong Western criticism of his human rights record throughout his long rule, made clear at the same time that he would accept any agreement on the Lapshin case that could be reached by Azerbaijan, Israel and Russia.

Lapshin was detained in Minsk two weeks after Lukashenko visited Baku and received Azerbaijan’s highest state award from President Ilham Aliyev. The two presidents have long maintained a warm personal rapport.

Lukashenko ruled out Lapshin’s release from Belarusian custody



despite Russia’s objections to the blogger’s extradition, which were first publicly expressed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov last month.

The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, reiterated earlier on Friday that Lapshin’s handover to Baku is “inadmissible.” According to the RIA Novosti news agency, Zakharova said Moscow is engaged in “intensive contacts” with the Belarusian authorities on the matter.

Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian condemned Lapshin’s prosecution as a “disgrace” on Tuesday. Both Armenia and Belarus are members of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Lukashenko defied the criticism amid rising tensions between Moscow and Minsk that have been triggered by a fresh dispute over the price of Russian oil and gas supplied to Belarus.

The 62-year-old strongman on Friday condemned Russia’s decision earlier this week to step up controls on the Russian-Belarusian border. He accused the Kremlin of violating treaties between the closely linked neighbors and using energy supplies to “grab us by the throat.”

EU will continue to invest in Armenia's future

Christian Danielsson, European Union's Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, and Luc Devigne, Director for Russia, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia, Regional Cooperation, and OSCE (EEAS) concluded a two-day visit to Armenia.

The EU high level officials visited Armenia on 02-03 February. The two-day working visit to Armenia was a part of the official visit to South Caucasus Region

On 3 February the Director General Danielsson and Director Devigne met with President Serzh Sargsyan, Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan and Government Ministers, representatives of civil society to discuss common priorities for further EU-Armenia cooperation.

They discussed the progress of the ongoing negotiations in the new EU-Armenia agreement, which will further deepen these relations. Both sides agreed to focus efforts to support a broad range of reforms in Armenia including public administration and justice sector, fight against corruption, and access to finance, education in order to enhance the country's economic growth and resilience. This will bring tangible results to citizens and will be important in view of the Brussels Summit in November 2017 and beyond.

As a part of the visit, on 02 February, the Director General Christian Danielsson participated in the official plaque unveiling ceremony of the newly-constructed building of the Court of First Instance in



the city of Ijevan, Tavush region financed by the European Union, together with the Minister of Justice of Armenia Arpine Hovhannisyanyan. In the evening of the same day the Director General met the Armenian youth and held a public lecture and discussion with them in Matenadaran on the future of EU-Armenia relations.

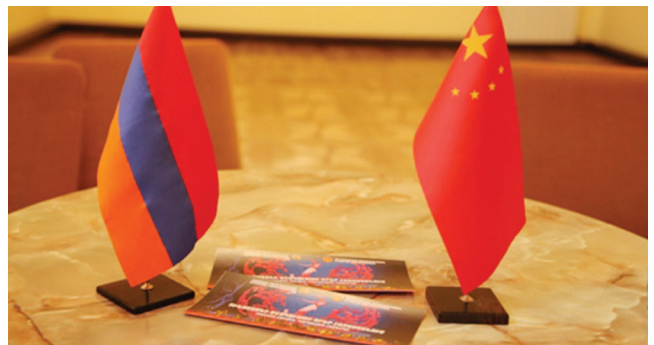
At the end of the visit Christian Danielsson said: "Armenia has many talented young people and a strong capacity for research and innovation. The EU will continue to invest in Armenia's future and support the country's drive for growth and ambitious reform plans to strengthen governance, fight corruption and ensure an independent, impartial and effective judiciary for the benefit of all Armenian citizens".

Armenia to appoint Trade Attaché to China

Armenia and China are planning to expand business cooperation and expand the trade relations. For this purpose, the Armenian government has adopted a decision, under which Armenia will appoint a Trade Attaché to China.

The presence of Armenia's Trade Attaché in China will allow to better present the Armenian economic interests in China, will facilitate the bilateral cooperation in the economic, commercial, scientific-technical fields and contribute to the establishment of ties.

The decision also pursues the aim of contributing to the implementation of the provisions of the Trade and Economic Agreement signed between the governments of Armenia and China.



Georgia unwilling to create problems with delivery of Russian gas to Armenia

Gita Elibekyan

The Georgian authorities assure that by agreeing to transit Russian gas to Armenia Georgia emphasizes the importance of economic and political rapprochement with the neighboring country. The issue, however, remains a hot topic in Georgia.

Under the pressure of the opposition, the authorities have revealed some details of the deal with Gazprom. Deputy Minister of Energy Mariam Valiashvili has said that "had Tbilisi not agreed to the terms offered by Moscow, the transit of gas through Georgia would be terminated and Armenia

would get gas from Iran."

"The existence of the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline is no secret to anyone. The capacity of the pipeline is 2.3 billion cubic meters, which is much more than Armenia's demand. In case the demands increase, it will be possible to quickly reshape the infrastructure, just as Russia did in case of Ukraine, where such infrastructure did not exist at all," Valiashvili said.

This statement raised even greater wave of criticism on the part of the opposition. Opposition MP David Darchiashvili says that "Georgia should first think about its in-

terests rather than those of the neighboring country."

"Negotiations on the deal were held behind closed doors, and the society does not have enough information about the content of the agreement. We have to be cautious with Russia on such important issues, as it is a matter of our national security," Darchiashvili says.

Besides, the opposition insists that Gazprom has no alternative route for delivering gas to Armenia, otherwise it would have used it over the past ten years.

Although the opposition is confident that

the deal is not fully acceptable, it helps solve a very important issue.

“To refuse from preconditions of Grzprom, as the opposition insists, would mean creating energy problems for a friendly country (Armenia), refusing from the function of being a transit country and breaking all ties with Gazprom,” says MP Gia Volski, a key member of the Georgian Dream.

“The Georgian authorities do not want to create additional problems for the neighboring country,” Volski said in an interview with Public Radio of Armenia.

“By accepting the preconditions of the Russian side, Georgia keeps transporting gas to Armenia, thus emphasizing the importance of economic and political rapprochement with the country,” he added.

Expert on energy issues Liana Zarvelidze considers that the concessions of the Georgian side are justified by the country’s position of maintaining its reputation as a transit country.

“All conditions exist for the delivery of Iranian gas to Armenia, the pipeline is there. Armenia could possibly get more gas from Iran, which Georgia would also use. However, Georgia is unwilling



to endanger its reputation of a transit country by opposing the Russian side,” she said.

ContourGlobal closes \$195 million of long-term debt financings for Vortan Hydroelectric Facility in Armenia

Financings include €51 million loan to upgrade the 405 MW Complex

ContourGlobal has announced that its subsidiary, ContourGlobal Hydro Cascade CJSC, signed two credit facilities which comprise nearly \$200 million of non-recourse long term financing for Armenian business on December 29, 2016.

A \$140 million long-term financing provided by the International Finance Corporation (“IFC”), Dutch development bank FMO and DEG the German Investment and Development Corporation was closed and disbursed on December 29, 2016. Proceeds from the loan will be used to re-finance bridge loans and shareholder loans that were put in place to fund the acquisi-

tion of the Vortan Facility from the Government of Armenia in 2015 and to pay an initial distribution to shareholders, as well as to fund the rehabilitation of the complex. The amortizing loan has an 18 year final maturity and IFC also provided an interest rate swap.

This financing comes alongside a €51 million loan from German Development bank KfW to the Government of Armenia that is being on-lent to the project to fund the electro-mechanical refurbishment and modernization of the plant. This on-loan, which also closed on December 29, 2016, has several tranches with maturities ranging from 2025-2050 and will be used to fund the refurbishment works. As a result of the

refurbishment project, new turbines, generators, transformers and auxiliary electrical and mechanical equipment are planned to replace the old equipment in the Tatev, Shamb and Spandaryan hydro power plants, which together make up the Vortan Facility. This will improve the reliability and safety of operations, prolong the life cycle of the plants and increase the availability factor of the cascade. The refurbishment is planned to be completed in 2021.

Joseph Brandt, President and CEO of ContourGlobal, the parent company of Vortan, said, “We are very pleased to have completed these innovative long-term financings for Vortan and we would like to thank our partners at IFC, FMO, DEG and KfW for their commitment to the project. We would also like to thank the Government of Armenia for their work to facilitate these transactions. These financings provide a stable, long-term capital structure which allows us to continue our work making sure that the operational performance, safety, reliability and efficiency of this plant are maintained at world-class standards.”

Vortan is a series of three individual hydroelectric power plants with a total electrical capacity of 405 MW located on the Vortan River in southern Armenia. The facility was acquired by ContourGlobal in July, 2015 with IFC concurrently acquiring a 20% interest in the project.



Ambassador Richard Mills Remarks to American Chamber of Commerce of Armenia

“Dear Ministers and Deputy Ministers, dear President of the American Chamber of Commerce in Armenia and Members of the AmCham Board of Directors, dear distinguished guests, thank you for joining me tonight. It is becoming a very pleasant tradition for me to deliver policy speeches before the AmCham, a tradition that reflects the strong partnership the Embassy enjoys with the Chamber and our deep respect and appreciation for the work you do in furthering U.S.-Armenia bilateral ties. As all of you know, I gave my first major policy speech before the Chamber and distinguished guests from the government back in November 2015.

In the speech, I outlined the four priorities I had set for myself and the Embassy over the tenure of my ambassadorship.

I announced these four priority areas 15 months ago because I wanted to be transparent with the Armenian government and people. I also pledged to share the efforts my Embassy would undertake to achieve those goals and, over time, my assessment of how much impact the Embassy’s efforts are having in furthering our goals. What I would like to do today is assess the quality and impact of the efforts the Embassy undertook to promote each priority, and offer some next steps as we look to continue working to advance these four priorities in partnership with the Armenian people and government.

When I think back on the past 15 months – that is, the period between my first speech before the Chamber in November 2015 and my address to you today – it is sobering to realize that in that relatively short space of time, we have witnessed events that have changed Armenia’s political and economic landscape, as well as demonstrated this country’s resiliency in the face of tragedy. The more time I spend in Armenia, and certainly in the tragic aftermath of last April’s fighting, the more I realize how much the lack of a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts diverts precious resources – both Armenian and those provided from Armenia’s international and diaspora friends – from our shared goals and, frankly, the priorities I and my Embassy

have set for ourselves.

The lack of a resolution to Nagorno-Karabakh fuels corruption because it keeps Armenia’s borders closed and, when borders are closed, it is easier for powerful business people and others to control economic markets and close off competition.

So as a preface to the rest of my remarks, let me underscore the continuing importance and priority the Embassy, the U.S. Government, and I personally will continue to give to achieving a peaceful settlement for Nagorno-Karabakh’s future.

Turning to my four priority areas, the questions I’d like to address today are two: where do we stand a year later on each of these, and what additional steps can be tak-

establish six new Farm and Veterinary Service Centers where local farmers can learn best practices in farm business development and animal breeding. USAID also provided direct support to Armenian rural producers by supporting their participation in local and international trade expos and festivals, helping to establish rural agricultural cooperatives that boost local economies and create jobs. Thanks to these activities, in the past year alone forty-one new businesses have been established, an additional forty-one start-ups have received additional financing from USAID, and over 650 temporary and permanent jobs in rural villages have been created.

The Embassy has also pursued several initiatives in the fields of entrepreneurship and STEM, which, I know this audience is well aware, stands for science, technology, engineering, and math. For example, USAID announced last year that it is partnering with IBM, Yerevan State University, and the Government of Armenia to establish the Innovative Solutions and Technologies Center, or ISTC, which will connect top U.S. technology universities with nine Armenian universities to develop IT workforce skills.

In addition, with the support of the American-Armenian Hovnanian family, the Embassy established last year the brand-new Fulbright-Hovnanian program for top-achieving students who wish to earn a Master’s degree in entrepreneurship or a STEM field in the United States, and will return to Armenia to put to work in the Armenian economy the knowledge that they have gained from study overseas.

Since the primary focus of my economic priority was the deepening of direct business ties between the U.S. and Armenia, I am delighted to report that we have made considerable progress this past year.

ContourGlobal completed the acquisition of the assets of the Vorotan hydroelectric facility in 2016, and now represents the largest single U.S. private investment in Armenia’s history and the first U.S. investment in Armenia’s energy sector. In addition, ContourGlobal plans to invest more than 70 million dollars over the next several years – and cre-



en? While the Embassy’s priorities are all long-term goals, and transformative change is not to be expected in the course of a year, we are looking for signs by which to measure our course and identify progress.

My first priority has been to deepen the business and trade relations between our two countries, as part of an overall focus on boosting Armenia’s prospects for economic growth.

This is the area where we have arguably seen the most progress and we are hopeful that many of the seeds we have planted will bear fruit in the not-too-distant future.

In keeping with the agricultural metaphor, let me mention first our ongoing contributions to Armenia’s agricultural development. Over the past two years, USAID has assessed this is a sector with significant economic and job potential – as well as the most effective way to prevent the migration out of rural villages – and that justifies new allocation of resources. So, USAID helped

ate about 150 near-term jobs. Meanwhile, another U.S.-affiliated firm, Lydian International, started the construction of its Amulsar mining project in 2016. By 2018, Amulsar will likely represent the largest U.S. equity investment in Armenia, with construction costs estimated at 370 million dollars from 2016 to 2018. During the peak construction phase up to 1,300 jobs will be secured, while 700 people will be employed directly by Lydian Armenia during 10 years of production. I am happy to report that in a first for Armenia and mining operations here, Amulsar's Environmental and Social Impact Assessment has been deemed fully compliant with standards set by the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Investment from Contour-Global and Lydian will amount to about half a billion dollars over the next few years.

Both companies also have been high-profile models of the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility in their respective interactions with local communities and by doing so, have encouraged its development among local Armenian companies as well.

To attract more – and more diversified – investment and business linkages, the Embassy also organized several well-received commercial events. For example, just two months ago, in November 2016, we partnered with two government ministries and HSBC Bank to hold a sustainable mining business conference that connected 35 Armenian mine operators with seven leading U.S. companies.

In total, throughout 2016, U.S. Embassy-organized commercial events and activities brought 20 U.S. companies to Armenia, most of which are represented in the Fortune 500 businesses list. Brands such as General Electric, IBM, Honeywell, Caterpillar, Dow, Oshkosh, and Open Systems International participated in these events.

Much of the Embassy's activity in creating new business connections between U.S. and Armenian entrepreneurs was given new stimulus in the wake of the first meeting of the U.S.-Armenia Council on Trade and Investment in November 2015, which was established by our two countries after the signing of our bilateral Trade and Investment Framework Agreement – known as TIFA – in May 2015. The purpose of the Council – and of the eight working groups that have been formed in such areas as Intellectual Property Rights, Government Procurement, and Customs – is to provide a regular platform for U.S. and Armenian technical experts to identify issues that hinder trade and investment between our two countries, and address these obstacles so that

our business ties can deepen further.

The U.S. government is committed to continuing to work with our partners in the Armenian government to expand trade opportunities between the U.S. and Armenia and we want TIFA to be successful. But to be maximally effective and achieve the increased trade that both our countries want, the TIFA Council needs to be more active. Business forums are all to the good, but we must hold the working groups' feet to the fire and ensure that they really tackle the existing and persistent barriers to trade and investment. If you or your companies are facing barriers to trade, tell us. The TIFA only works when it is business-driven. Believe me; you don't want a bunch of bureaucrats to drive the agenda.

One area where I would encourage the Armenian government to be more active is Customs, because the simplified and transparent implementation of customs procedures is a necessary prerequisite for Armenia to expand trade with the rest of the world. Although I recognize that Armenia has to harmonize its customs and other trade facilitation procedures to conform to those of the Eurasian Economic Union, I encourage the Armenian government not to lose sight of its continuing obligations with regard to the World Trade Organization and its other international trading partners. I specifically suggest that the Armenian government further review its use of "reference pricing" and classification procedures for goods imported from abroad, as these can create barriers to large-scale international trade and negatively impact Armenian consumers.

Let me now move to our second priority, partnering with Armenians to fight corruption. We have seen some positive outcomes, but much remains to be done.

I am pleased and encouraged by the fact that Prime Minister Karapetyan has made the fight against corruption a priority in his public remarks, and I have been heartened to see more Armenians speaking openly about how corruption affects them.

One area where we have seen significant progress, and for which I wish to strongly commend the Armenian government, is in its commitment to have Armenia join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, or EITI.

EITI membership requires that the government, civil society, and the mining industry come together to foster greater transparency and the clean, responsible, and sustainable development of mining. The Government, with USAID support, has worked hard on its candidacy package, forming a multi-stakeholder working group with representatives

from extractive companies, civil society, and international partners, and formally submitting its membership application to the Board of the EITI in December 2016. Joining EITI is not an end in itself, but it is a significant commitment to increased transparency and to uphold international standards in the all-important mining sector.

Over the past year, the Embassy has partnered with the government and civil society on a number of other anti-corruption initiatives. For instance, we have supported programs by local media outlets to develop their investigative journalism skills, which helps the media sector fulfill its crucial democratic function of holding government and public figures accountable and of keeping the citizenry informed. In other example, a USAID-funded anti-corruption project identified corruption risks in the health care sector and developed 55 recommendations – many of which would impart real benefits to everyday Armenians – which have been submitted to the Ministry of Health for consideration.

While the link between corruption and economic development, and between corruption and rule of law, have always been apparent, recently we've seen more discussion in Armenia about how corruption can impact and threaten national security. When I mentioned the intersection between corruption and national security in my speech to the AmCham 15 months ago, many people were surprised, many were dismissive. I don't claim credit at all, but I think this issue is now more frankly addressed in Armenian political debates, and with proposals for serious action from the government, than it has been in the past. Certainly the public discourse during and after the Four-Day War in April highlighted the corrosive effect corruption can have on national security and brought the issue into the public spotlight.

However, the only way to achieve meaningful progress in the fight against corruption is for the government to demonstrate political will. The government must strengthen and empower public institutions at all levels and send a clear message from on high that corruption will not be tolerated and that no one is above the law. Absent this message, no truly transformative change can occur.

Encouraged by the Prime Minister's public commitment to tackle corruption, I offer two specific suggestions for the government to consider.

First, I suggest that the government strengthen the independent role and responsibilities of the Ethics Commission on High

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Ambassador Richard Mills Remarks to American Chamber of Commerce of Armenia

from page 9

Ranking Officials. I applaud the government's recent step in this direction. Significant changes have been made to the Administrative Violations Code and Criminal Code, providing for fines, criminal sentences, and limitations on holding government positions for 3 years for individuals who submit false income declarations. But more needs to be done. One fix would be for the Government to make clear that the launching of an investigation into possible corrupt activities by a government official does not require specific evidence of an actual bribe paid or a favor given, but could be triggered by a prosecutor's assessment that the assets declared by a government official are so great as to trigger reasonable grounds of suspicion. Armenian media has done a very good job of analyzing ethics declarations and identifying instances where officials declare assets that are 40, 50 or one hundred times greater than their government salaries, but there was no indication of follow up by the Government.

And I respectfully suggest that the government consider establishing a fully independent anti-corruption body with full investigative and prosecutorial authority. This was a specific recommendation by Mr. Peter Ainsworth, the Senior Anticorruption Counsel of the U.S. Department of Justice whom the Embassy brought to Armenia twice in the last year for consultations with government and civil society. This seems a propitious time for the government to consider this suggestion, as we understand the Prime Minister is currently deciding how to restructure the existing Anti-Corruption Council and formalize the connections and lines of authority between the Anti-Corruption Council and other bodies with anti-corruption mandates.

Let me address an anti-corruption action the Embassy undertook in 2015 that has been controversial with many in Armenia. I know that our decision to provide USAID-funded support to the work of the Anti-Corruption Council was harshly criticized by many commentators over the past two years.

In response, we have said repeatedly – including in my remarks in November 2015 to all of you – that we are willing to work with any Armenian governmental institution that demonstrates a commitment to fighting corruption, but that at the same time, our

continued support for the Council was contingent on the achievement of measureable results. Because of its lack of progress thus far, less than 2.5% of the money allocated for its support was actually released to the Council. I hope this fact will assuage the suspicions of the many people who speculated that USAID delivered the entire sum of money to the Council in an unmarked briefcase— we're the U.S. government, not characters in a James Bond film. We have shared with the Prime Minister our need to see concrete progress from the Council and I know he wants to reshape the Council and its work as well. Based on the outcome of our discussions with the Prime Minister, we will decide on next steps, including whether to continue our support to the Council or redirect those funds to a different anti-corruption mechanism.

Now let me now turn to our third priority, the strengthening of democratic institutions, human rights, and civil society in Armenia. We have been deeply engaged on multiple fronts in this area.

Despite some progress and notable success stories which give reason for hope, we have also witnessed some troubling trends in the areas of human rights and rule of law. Let me first mention some of Armenia's very laudable successes in this area. One of the most impressive is the fact that it retained its status as a Tier I country in the State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report for the fourth straight year, thanks in large part to its interagency working group, which is a model of cooperation between the government and civil society. But if I may add just one thing: to ensure that its efforts in preventing trafficking in persons continue to be recognized, I do urge the government to reinstate the Labor Inspectorate without delay. Without a functioning Labor Inspectorate it is very difficult to track and prevent trafficking in labor and especially child labor. In another win for civil society, and the Embassy's efforts, we were able to congratulate the Armenian government for passing just two weeks ago the Law on Public Organizations, which is a complete game changer for NGOs in this country, allowing them to pursue greater financial independence and long-term sustainability. In the area of human rights, we are greatly encouraged by the initiative of the Ministry of Defense to establish a Center for Human Rights and Building Integrity, which the

U.S. Embassy has supported, as well as by recent reports that the Ministry has created a hotline for parents to call if they have questions or concerns about their sons' treatment in the military.

I also want to mention that thanks to small grants from the Embassy, several Armenian NGOs were able to implement projects that have made a real difference: SOSE Women's Issues NGO carried out an amazingly creative social media campaign against sex-selective abortions, and several NGOs – including the Kendo National Association, Dasaran, and Aleppo – have implemented projects benefitting individuals with disabilities and promoting social inclusion.

What these success stories tell me is that there are many organizations and many people within government and in civil society that care deeply about these issues and are dedicated to bringing about real change within Armenian society.

But as I said, we also witnessed troubling trends over the past 15 months that give cause for real concern.

With regard to the constitutional referendum of December 2015, the Embassy was deeply concerned about the credible allegations of electoral fraud that came from non-partisan observers, media, and civil society. Shortly after the referendum took place, we issued a public statement calling on the government to transparently investigate every case where there was credible evidence of fraud, and to prosecute suspected individuals to the fullest extent of the law. Following the referendum, the Embassy put down a clear marker, publicly announcing that we would draw upon the information contained in public reports to determine whether individuals who directly interfered in the integrity of the referendum process would be ineligible to participate in Embassy-sponsored programs or activities. And although I cannot share information about the individuals who have been affected by this decision out of respect for their privacy I can assure you that we have followed through on our pledge.

Following the constitutional referendum, I very much welcomed President Sargsyan's public commitment to address the public's lack of trust in the electoral process. I agree with the President's characterization that these elections will shape the future of Armenia and it is crucial they be free and fair, and that the Armenian people have confi-

dence in the results. To help make the Armenian government's public commitment to credible elections a reality, USAID – in partnership with the European Union, the UK, Germany, and the UN Mission to Armenia – has provided financial support for the new voting processes and electoral equipment agreed upon by the government, political opposition, and civil society last year, unprecedented agreements that required compromises on all sides. These measures will make possible same-day voter authentication and the publication of signed voter lists after the elections. But let me be clear: these additional measures cannot, by themselves, guarantee free and fair elections. They can make the electoral process more transparent and make it more costly to commit fraud, but the elections will be free and fair only if the government demonstrates the political will to make them so, and if the political opposition and civil society act to safeguard the process. The burden is on the government and its constituent institutions – the Central Election Commission, law enforcement bodies, and the judiciary – to take the appropriate actions and foster a climate in which the Armenian people are able to freely express their will at the voting booth. At the same time, a free and fair election also requires responsible civic engagement in the election process from the political opposition and civil society, which is why we were glad to see them work with the Government last year, and hope that spirit of positive and constructive collaboration will continue throughout the electoral period and beyond.

For free and fair elections to take place, the government must also create a climate in which media and civil society are free, independent, and unfettered. We have recently heard intimations of increased pressure on media and civil society that seems designed to constrain their freedom of expression and redirect critical editorial views in advance of the parliamentary elections this spring. If true, this would be very worrying and would further erode Armenia's standing in reports issued by international organizations on press freedoms worldwide. We do take the government at its word that it intends to conduct free and fair elections, just as we take the opposition parties and civil society at their word that they intend to play a constructive role in the process, and this is something we'll be watching closely over the next few months.

Let me now address the events of Erebuni last July. During much of the 15-day standoff, Armenia's law enforcement struck a good balance in terms of securing Armenians' safety and security around an active

site, while defending Armenians' rights to peacefully protest. However, we were deeply concerned by the credible reports of excessive use of force used by the police against unarmed protestors and journalists on July 29-30. We made our concerns clear at that time, noting that such actions violated press freedom and the rights of Armenian citizens to the freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly. Although some police officers have been punished for their actions on that day, more could and should have been done in this regard. Serious crimes occurred the evening of July 29-30 and it is important that those responsible be held to account.

Another area of concern which the fallout of Erebuni highlighted, has been the Government's use of pre-trial detention. While it is true that pre-trial detention is used in legal systems around the world, including in the United States, it should be a last resort, employed only when there are no other feasible alternatives to ensure that a suspect won't flee or interfere with the ongoing investigation. It should never be used as a punitive tool to keep citizens from exercising their rights of free speech and assembly, and when pre-trial detention is ordered by the court, the reasons for doing so need to be fully transparent and grounded in a strong legal basis. I will be frank that in the case of Erebuni and other politically sensitive cases this year, we are concerned by the pre-trial detentions of several defendants who participated in the demonstrations or are suspected of giving non-violent support to the militants, but were not involved in the actual armed seizure of the police station or in the deaths of the policemen.

Let me be clear, my intention in mentioning these cases is not to prejudge their guilt or innocence, but to emphasize that each pre-trial detention decision must be based on a strong, fully transparent legal rationale. And the burden – again – is on the authorities to make these bases evident, or to proceed to an open trial as quickly as possible.

With that, I'll move to our fourth priority, doing a better job of explaining U.S. foreign policy to Armenian audiences.

I identified this as a priority because many of the Armenians with whom I meet – even some people who have visited or lived in the United States in the past – have told us they do not understand U.S. policies. This is a challenging battle in many ways, given the realities of the media environment in Armenia. Armenians have limited exposure to U.S. and Western news sources, and even though Internet penetration is increasing every year, facilitating access to U.S. media

outlets, many Armenians lack the necessary English skills to take advantage of this. I have spoken to groups such as yours and at several universities; American staff at the Embassy have partnered with alumni to discuss various foreign policy issues at our American Corners; I've done a number of interviews and live Facebook chats; and we have a strong and active presence on Facebook and Twitter. I'd be interested in hearing what your thoughts are, how you think we are doing and how we can do better. If you think expanding understanding of U.S. actions in the world is a worthwhile goal, I encourage you to follow us on Facebook and Twitter, comment on our posts, and share them with your contacts. To sum up, I am proud of the efforts my Embassy has undertaken in the last 15 months to advance these four priority areas. I think our decision to focus on specific areas has been beneficial, for it allows us to concentrate the various tools and resources available to different sections and agencies within the Embassy and challenged me and my staff to design creative and complementary programs that can make a difference in areas that impact everyday Armenians every single day. We've helped create jobs, clinch new investments, and start conversations between U.S. and Armenian businesses, and we've brought American experts to liaise with Armenian government officials and counterparts in areas where U.S. expertise can be helpful. As we move forward, however, there is still much room for improvement.

I'm coming to the end of a long speech, but before concluding, I want to mention that with a new U.S. president in office, this is obviously a time of transition and change, and with change can come opportunity. I can tell you that whenever we have a new administration, the new team on board has lots of questions, and it is our job at the U.S. Embassy in Armenia – working in tandem with our Washington-based colleagues at the State Department – to provide the members of the new Administration with background and information so they can fully appreciate the contours and nuances of the U.S.-Armenia relationship, the importance of our interests in the South Caucasus region, and the depth of friendship that our two countries enjoy.

I thank you for your attention, your interest, and your friendship. I look forward to speaking with many of you personally during the second half of the evening. And let me say thank you once more to the Chamber for their hospitality and generosity in hosting tonight's event.

Thank you".

Armenia 's Leading Telecom Operator News and Smth about Corporate Social Responsibility...

“QARTEZ” – find the location you need with just one touch on your smartphone and tablet screen

What a first-time visitor to a city is doing before anything else? He is definitely looking for a reliable, easy-to-understand and comprehensive travel guide in order to get information about city attractions, sights, service infrastructure and options of routes to those places.

From now on, visitors of Yerevan and city inhabitants will be able to make most of their time in Yerevan with the new “QARTEZ” application, providing full access to the detailed map of the capital.

“QARTEZ” will help get oriented around the city, check out one’s actual location and get contacts of organizations working in different spheres of service: government bodies, banks, medical and educational institutions, stores, food points, WCs, entertainment centers, pharmacies, small booths, a and other locations in Yerevan, directly via the mobile device, with just one touch.

“QARTEZ application is a useful tool made available to the visitors of Yerevan to help them explore the history of one of the ancient cities of the world, to feel its pulse, and to discover the life style of its inhabitants. The application adds to the convenience and attractiveness of the city for the visitors, and is a serious step toward making Yerevan one of the best and desired touristic destinations. The largest in Armenia 3G and 4G networks of VivaCell-MTS will help fully utilize the capacity of the application,” VivaCell-MTS Founding General Manager **Ralph Yirikian** commented.

The application is also an advertising platform for all companies wishing to make promotions of their products, adding information or simply posting videos/banners about their companies in the respective personal pages. “QARTEZ” application gives an opportunity to make calls, write an e-mail message, leave a comment, watch a video material, get acquainted with sales offers and discounts, and use many other functions.

The mobile application is available for smartphones with Android and iOS operating systems.

The application is free. Charges for data usage apply.

In the near future, the maps of Dilijan and Tsaghkadzor will be included in “QARTEZ” application. The application is the cooperative effort of VivaCell-MTS and “Locator”

(Phone: 060 27-01-05, e-mail: info@qartez.am).

Corporate Social Responsibility

What is Corporate Responsibility?

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reflects the commitments of any business and other organizations, whether in the private or the public sector, towards the society in which they operate.

The fact is that companies have an impact on society and the environment through their operations, products and services and through their interaction with key stakeholders such as employees, customers, investors, local communities, suppliers and others.

CSR means understanding such impacts and managing business processes in a way to add social, environmental and economic



value for producing a positive sustainable outcome for both society and the business. In other words it’s a living managerial language, which penetrates into each function and can not be confined to random programs conducted by few departments in isolation from one another.

CSR is about believing and translating the words and the promises into real actions.

There is no universal definition of CSR because this concept is always being redefined thus, serving to needs and times, giving each company individually the freedom to define the values and principles it stands for.

Nevertheless, there are essential elements of CSR that need to be acknowledged:

- CSR is voluntary in inspiration
- CSR is multidimensional and diverse in application

• CSR is interactive in building bridges between corporate bodies and society

• CSR approach and implementation evolves and develops over time in an ongoing learning process

Why should companies care about their social and environmental responsibilities?

“Environmental and Social Responsibility should beat at the heart of every business leader.” - Anita Roddick

Businesses don’t exist in a geographical or social vacuum; they are a part of society and located physically in particular communities and areas. This is in part a general civic and social responsibility towards the local communities in which business operates.

VivaCell-MTS believes in Armenia and recognizes this responsibility and thus the Company has been always striving to integrate it in the core of any strategic thinking and planning, and this is reflected in its daily operational behavior.

Developing and communicating a comprehensive CSR strategy takes time, commitment, focus, dedicated people and financial resources. It requires as well commitment from the top management down. CSR strategy must permeate all what we do – from hiring to branding to manufacturing to sales.

CSR Benefits to Businesses

The increased awareness and focus on corporation’s responsibilities gives the business the opportunity to be important and powerful actor in society. It makes a business more competitive, resilient to shocks, and more likely to attract and hold both consumers and best employees.

The basic requirement for the economic development is sustainable business; the success of each business itself depends on the well-being of its citizens, society in its broadest sense.

Taking into consideration the fact that CSR aims at achieving advanced economy, development of harmonious society and preservation of natural environment, corporations and business communities should be the most interested identities in being engaged in CSR. It’s not by chance that CSR is also recognized as “win-win policy”.

The awareness of CSR is becoming so high that every stakeholder will demand information concerning its treatment in the companies. Customers will require companies to contribute to broader societal goals beyond the usual role of making profit, pay-

ing taxes etc.

VivaCell-MTS believes that CSR procurement is becoming vital to encourage customers to buy from the responsible company, investors to put their trust in it and the best people to work for such a company.

CSR for VivaCell-MTS

VivaCell-MTS CSR vision is to better enhance the status of the company and that by positioning and developing its role as a pre-eminent local financial and business centre working for the benefit of Arme-

nians, Armenia and its nation at large.

VivaCell-MTS is well aware that Corporate Social Responsibility is the subject of increasing attention and discussion at national and international levels bringing the business closer to society. Businesses that choose to ignore their society can harm their own success.

VivaCell-MTS believes in its capacity to contribute in promoting the understanding of multidimensional and evolving nature of CSR, hoping to set an example for other local institutions to follow the same steps.

For us CSR is to work and build business

and social relationships based on respect, ethics, dedication responsibility and trust; to maintain healthy and safe workplace for all our employees; to provide the conditions which are conducive to the development of the professional strengths and sense of individual accountability; to strive for equal approach in employee hiring and promotion; to keep honest relationships with suppliers; to deliver quality service for all our citizens.

Prosperity can not be maximized in isolation; we must build it hand in hand, and it is hand in hand that we should walk towards future Armenia.

The Youth Orchestra News

"Terrific performance of a symphony that is rarely performed (at least in the U.S.). First time I have watched it 'live.' This is an outstanding ensemble. If one were listening to it on FM-radio, you would never guess that it is a youth orchestra. They sound like seasoned professionals. BTW, where is the hall? Looks like a great place to attend a concert. Thanks for posting these videos," has written **Dr. Wayne Lutton**, Editor of American journal "The Social Contract" on SYOA performance of the #2 "Bell" Symphony by Aram Khachaturian posted in YouTube.

By the way, from now on every month the Youth Orchestra will be summing up what was done within the month and what is scheduled for the coming month via video newsletter posted in YouTube.

Alexander Haroutiunian Woodwind-Piano Quartet celebrated the 1st anniversary of its concert activity

The Alexander Haroutiunian Woodwind-Piano Quartet, an ensemble of the State Youth Orchestra of Armenia celebrated the 1st anniversary of its concert activity on January 26 at the concert hall of the Komitas Museum-Institute.

By the way, the Quartet's first appearance on the stage took place exactly at the same

concert hall about a year ago. The quartet was created to mark Alexander Haroutiunian's 95th anniversary.

Haroutiunian Woodwind-Piano Quartet is one of the ensembles of the State Youth Or-



chestra of Armenia. It is unique in its staff: **Lilit Zakaryan** (piano), **David Gyulamiryan** (clarinet), **Nikolay Poghosyan** (bassoon), **Gevorg Avetisyan** (flute).

The concert of the quartet was a unique report summarizing the one-year activity of the collective. And the past year was rich enough in bright moments and events. Due to its uniqueness and high level of performing art the quartet managed to gain the recognition of the international audience. As the musicians notice, their main goal was to bring a new word into the musical world. And as time has shown they have succeeded.

The event was attended by **Narine Haroutiunian**, Alexander Haroutiunian's daughter who praised the work of the quartet.

"These musicians did a great job – they have performed with concerts in Armenia, China, Lebanon and Russia, recorded an album, many composers write pieces specifically for them. I think this is a great achievement for the first year; and hope this success will be continuous", – said Narine Haroutiunian.

During the concert the compositions by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Alexander Haroutiunian, Sergey Prokofiev and Leonard Bernstein were presented. The pieces were arranged specifically for this quartet. During the evening the Armenian presentation of the CD of the Haroutiunian Woodwind-Piano Quartet took place.

The 8th Armenian Composing Art Festival launches

The 8th Armenian Composing Art Festival will be held in Yerevan on February 15-28. To remind, the main goal of the Festival is to spread the musical art of Armenian classical and contemporary composers, to strongly uphold the traditions of Armenian composing school by presenting its every achievement worldwide.

Each year this annual festival is dedicated to one of the Armenian renowned composers. This year's festival is dedicated to the 120th anniversary of the Armenian composer **Haro Stepanyan** and is entitled *Haro Stepanyan-Fest*.

The Festival promises plenty of surprises: five symphony and chamber concerts, several Armenian and international premieres, famous soloists, including pianist Nareh Arghamanyan.

One of the biggest achievements of the project is the digitization of never presented before chamber and symphony compositions by Stepanyan.

The Festival is organized by the State Youth Orchestra of Armenia. The Artistic Director of the Armenian Composers' Art Festival is **Sergey Smbatyan**. The Fest is held under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Armenia **Serzh Sargsyan** and with the support of the Ministry of Culture.

Haro Stepanyan (1897-1966) is a talented and unique composer who contributed greatly to the development of the Armenian music culture. He wrote five operas, three symphonies, numerous songs, romances, chamber – instrumental works.



Students across US to stage silent protest against denial of the Armenian Genocide

Asbarez – On Thursday February 9, the All-Armenian Student Association (All-ASA) will be coordinating the annual simultaneous college campus “Stain of Denial” silent protest against denial of the Armenian Genocide. ASA chapters on their respective college and university campuses will stage protests. The event is co-sponsored by the Western and Eastern Regions of the Armenian Youth Federation, ARF Shant Student Association, Alpha Gamma Alpha, and Alpha Epsilon Omega.

Stain of Denial is organized to engage college students in raising awareness about the Armenian Genocide, its ongoing denial, and the need for recognition and reparations. The protest is held every winter in order to symbolize the fact that genocide denial by nations including the Republic of Turkey and the United States continuously occurs throughout the year and not only on April 24th, the day that is typically cited as the beginning of the systematic deportation and extermination of Armenians and other minorities in the Ot-

toman Empire. The protest will concurrently take place on campuses throughout the United States from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, along with complimentary activity on social media that specifically incorporates the hashtags #StainOfDenial, #ArmenianGenocide, and #DivestTurkey, aimed at augmenting the event’s exposure. The messaging of the protest at each campus will highlight three themes: history of the genocide, its consequences and contemporary conditions of affected Armenians worldwide and current student action. The third theme specifically highlights resolutions that ASAs have passed through their student government councils, including both Armenian Genocide recognition and divestment bills, the latter of which targets over \$70 million of University of California funds allocated toward the Turkish government as a part of the #DivestTurkey initiative.

The All-ASA openly invites alumni, graduate students, faculty, non-Armenian student organizations, and the general public to join

their respective campus’ ASA in the call for justice, either in-person or on social media if they are unable to physically participate. The All-ASA released a statement preceding the protest, reading: “The Armenian Genocide claimed the lives of 1.5 million people and forced the dispersion of Armenians throughout the world. The Republic of Turkey, a descendant regime of the Ottoman Empire, has led a denial campaign since its founding to stave off responsibility for necessary reparations, setting a cyclical precedent for the repression of justice. The United States, under political pressure from Turkey, has also refused to acknowledge the genocide by its rightful classification. As Armenian-Americans, we believe that politics and humanity need to be held in separate realms. The Stain of Denial is a tool to educate each campus’ community about the Armenian experience and the cycle of genocide.”

ASAs participating in this year’s Stain of Denial include those based at Cal Poly Pomona, Cal State Northridge, the Claremont Colleges, Glendale Community College, Los Angeles Valley College, Loyola Marymount University, Occidental College, Pasadena City College, Santa Monica College, UC Los Angeles, UC Irvine, UC Riverside, UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, UC Santa Cruz, and the University of Southern California. For the first time in its history, Stain of Denial will also include universities outside of California as well: Armenian students at Northeastern and Tufts Universities located in Boston, Massachusetts, Yale University, Concordia University, Montreal, and various colleges on the East coast of Canada will be participating. Information on Stain of Denial including details about campus protest locations can be found on the All-ASA website: www.all-asa.org.

The All-Armenian Student Association (All-ASA) works to unite various Armenian-American college student organizations and serve the greater Armenian-American community through cultural, social, educational, and activist programming. As the largest confederation of ASAs in the nation, All-ASA is dedicated to collaboration among its constituent organizations, leadership development of its members, and community service.



ANCA statement on White House immigration executive order



The Armenian National Committee of America on Monday issued the following statement regarding the January 27, White House Executive Order on immigration, titled, “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States”.

The complete text of the ANCA statement is provided below.

ANCA Statement on the White House Immigration Executive Order

The Armenian National Committee of America remains engaged and concerned regarding the developing situation surrounding the White House’s January 27th immigration Executive Order, both at the level of U.S. policy and in terms of this action’s impact on Armenian individuals and families.

As has been widely reported, the Executive Order, titled, “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States,” places restrictions on travel

to the U.S. by citizens of Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Sudan.

This travel ban has been applied to refugees and visa holders from these designated countries as well as to those with green cards who already have permanent residency or other legal status in the US. The ban, initially in effect for a period of 90 days, may become permanent. We have witnessed uneven and inconsistent enforcement of the order, reflecting apparent confusion among government officials and within the travel industry. The federal courts have issued a stay on the enforcement of the order, but the extent of this legal action, and how it will affect non-U.S. citizens, remains unclear. Future Congressional and court action may also influence how non-U.S. citizens and their families are impacted.

As the ANCA continues to engage relevant stakeholders – including Congress and the White House – we offer the following recommendations:

1. The ANCA encourages Armenians whose relatives or friends have been detained at U.S. ports of entry or who have been blocked from re-entry to the U.S. to contact us immediately at travel@anca.org or (202) 775-1918. Please be prepared to share basic information, including a description of the situation and the name of any legal counsel. (This information will remain confidential.)

2. Until there is greater clarity regarding the full legal scope and nature of these restrictions, the ANCA recommends that Armenians from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, who are not U.S. citizens, refrain from leaving the U.S., due to the increased risk that they will be denied re-entry, regardless of their immigration status.

3. The ANCA is regularly consulting with civil and legal rights organizations for the most up to date information on this unfolding situation and will provide community updates, as they become available.

As Americans of Armenian heritage – a community of proud immigrants, many descended from the families of Armenian Genocide survivors with roots in Syria, Iraq, Iran and other countries cited in this order – we remain deeply concerned by the moral, legal and humanitarian implications of these new restrictions. We will act vigilantly to protect the human and legal rights of Armenians harmed by this executive order. As a matter of public policy, we are communicating our concerns, on a bipartisan basis, with both houses of Congress and the White House. Consistent with our mission, we will remain vigilant in protecting the welfare of our community and advancing our shared interest in a strong Diaspora, a secure Armenia, a free Artsakh, and a just resolution of the Armenian Genocide.

Freedom in the World 2017: Armenia & Karabakh ranked as ‘partly free’

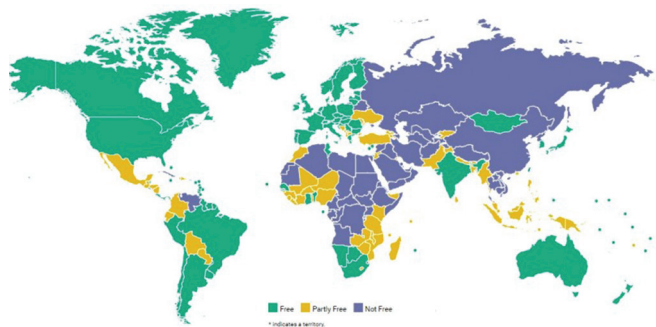
The Freedom House ranks Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh as “partly free” in its Freedom in the World 2017 report.

Armenia’s neighbors Georgia and Turkey are also ‘partly free,’ while Azerbaijan and Iran are ranked as ‘not free.’

Armenia’s partners in the Eurasian Economic Union Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan are listed among ‘not free’ countries. Kyrgyzstan is ranked as ‘partly free.’

Freedom in the World is an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties, composed of numerical ratings and descriptive texts for each country and a select group of related and disputed territories. The 2017 edition covers developments in 195 countries and 14 territories from January 1, 2016, through December 31, 2016.

Freedom in the World assesses the real-world rights and freedoms enjoyed by individuals, rather than governments or government



performance per se. Political rights and civil liberties can be affected by both state and nonstate actors, including insurgents and other armed groups.

Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian: I'm the great grandson of refugees who fled the Armenian Genocide



Alexis Ohanian, the co-founder of Reddit and the son of an undocumented US immigrant, says President Donald Trump's immigration ban is both "deeply un-American" and "potentially unconstitutional." Ohanian expressed his views in an open letter to the Reddit community posted to the official Reddit blog.

The tech industry figure describes himself as not only the son of an undocumented German immigrant, but also "the great grandson of refugees who fled the Armenian Genocide." Ohanian says welcoming both groups — immigrants and refugees — is America's "unfair advantage," quoting a startup term for besting the competition. "Without them, there's no me, and there's no Reddit. We are Americans," he writes. "Let's not forget that we've thrived as a nation because we've been a beacon for the courageous — the tired, the poor, the tempest-tossed."

The letter reads:

A little over a century ago, a Turkish soldier decided my great grandfather was too young to kill after cutting down his parents in front of him; instead of turning the sword on the boy, the soldier sent him to an orphanage. Many Armenians, including my great grandmother, found

sanctuary in Aleppo, Syria—before the two reconnected and found their way to Ellis Island. Thankfully they weren't retained, rather they found this message:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

My great grandfather didn't speak much English, but he worked hard, and was able to get a job at Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company in Binghamton, NY. That was his family's golden door. And though he and my great grandmother had four children, all born in the U.S., immigration continued to reshape their family, generation after generation. The one son they had—my grandfather (here's his AMA)—volunteered to serve in the Second World War and married a French-Armenian immigrant. And my mother, a native of Hamburg, Germany, decided to leave her friends, family, and education behind after falling in love with my father, who was born in San Francisco.

She got a work visa as an au pair in the U.S., uprooting her entire life for love in a foreign land. After she and my father mar-

ried, she received a green card, which she kept for over a decade until she became a citizen. I grew up speaking German, but she insisted I focus on my English in order to be successful. She eventually got her citizenship and I'll never forget her swearing in ceremony.

If you've never seen people taking the pledge of allegiance for the first time as U.S. Citizens, it will move you: a room full of people who can really appreciate what I was lucky enough to grow up with, simply by being born in Brooklyn. It thrills me to write reference letters for enterprising founders who are looking to get visas to start their companies here, to create value and jobs for these United States.

My forebears were brave refugees who found a home in this country. I've always been proud to live in a country that said yes to these shell-shocked immigrants from a strange land, that created a path for a woman who wanted only to work hard and start a family here.

Without them, there's no me, and there's no Reddit. We are Americans. Let's not forget that we've thrived as a nation because we've been a beacon for the courageous—the tired, the poor, the tempest-tossed.

Right now, Lady Liberty's lamp is dimming, which is why it's more important than ever that we speak out and show up to support all those for whom it shines—past, present, and future. I ask you to do this however you see fit, whether it's calling your representative (this works, it's how we defeated SOPA + PIPA), marching in protest, donating to the ACLU, or voting, of course, and not just for Presidential elections.

Our platform, like our country, thrives the more people and communities we have within it. Reddit, Inc. will continue to welcome all citizens of the world to our digital community and our office.

Council of Europe urged to investigate Azerbaijan bribery allegations

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has been accused of turning a blind eye to corruption, after allegations that a former senior member was paid €2.39m to engineer votes to protect the kleptocratic regime of Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, *The Guardian* reports.

Pieter Omtzigt, a centre-right Dutch parliamentarian, is urging PACE leaders to launch a "deep, thorough investigation by an independent panel" that makes its findings public.

"We see a lot of suspicious outcomes of votes and procedures on Azerbaijan," Omtzigt told *The Guardian*. The Dutch Christian

Democrat is the co-author of a resolution calling for an urgent investigation and overhaul of the assembly's code of conduct.

The Council of Europe, which was created in 1949 to protect democracy and promote the rule of law, has 47 members including Russia and Turkey. Azerbaijan joined in 2001, but observers have long raised questions about the parliamentary assembly's weak response to ballot-box stuffing and human rights violations in the oil-rich country.

Human rights groups have blamed "caviar diplomacy", gifts of gold, silver, silk carpets and the regional fishy delicacy, which are showered on visiting dignitaries to the capital, Baku.

The latest allegations are centred on Italian politician Luca Volontè, the former chair of the centre-right group in the parliamentary assembly. He is being investigated by the Milan public prosecutor's office for allegedly accepting €2.39m in bribes, in exchange for working for Azerbaijan in the parliamentary assembly. Human rights groups allege he played a key role in orchestrating the defeat of a highly critical report on the abuse of political prisoners in Azerbaijan in 2013. Volontè denies any wrongdoing.

Many senior parliamentarians have



warned that failure to carry out an independent investigation would erode the credibility of the human rights body, which was inspired by Winston Churchill, and sends election monitors to every corner of Europe. "It is not credible if you tell other countries to be open and transparent if you do not investigate credible allegations of vote-rigging," Omtzigt said.

One fifth of PACE's 324 parliamentarians have signed Omtzigt's resolution, which states that "recent, serious and credible allegations of grave misconduct" risk undermining public confidence in the assembly. The signatories are a cross-party coalition, drawn from 25 countries, including the UK, France, Germany, the Nordic countries, the Baltic countries, Greece and Ukraine.

Momondo: Yerevan among best budget holiday destinations of 2017

The independent global travel search site Momondo has included Armenia's capital Yerevan among the best budget holiday destinations of 2017.

The website writes: "Give in to the minibus chaos to criss-cross your way

through the city – for 100 Dram, and a loudly shouted "stop!" you'll be dropped off at the Yerevan's prized monuments. The pedestrian Northern Avenue takes you from the opera to the fountains at Republic Square. Impos-

ing Soviet era buildings by day, elegant backdrop to a light and water show at night, the Republic Square is inevitably a must-see.

Enjoy the long summer nights in the pink city, as it's called due to the pinkish stones of the buildings, at the café terraces, while snacking on *lamehjun* (Armenian-style pizza). Rebuilt to hide the scars of wars and natural disasters, most of Yerevan's current attire is only a century old. Yerevan's oldest heritage lies along the outskirts of the city where the Hrazdan River and deep gorge create a natural border."

Other cities in the list include: Sofia (Bulgaria), San Antonio (Texas, USA), Valparaíso (Chile), Braga (Portugal), Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain), Belfast (Northern Ireland), Lviv (Ukraine), Pristina (Kosovo), Panama City (Panama), Kalamata (Greece), Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina).



Zodiac Weekly Forecast



Aries (March 20–April 19)

Venus enters your sign on Friday and will be traveling “with you” through March. She makes a retrograde loop and returns on April 28 through May. Often when Venus is

prominent we become more interested in anything which adds beauty or luxury to our lives. The subject of relationships will be especially prominent. I will be writing a lot about this in the next few weeks.



Taurus (April 20 – May 20)

A bit of R&R is in order through this spring. You are in need of some time for introspection and reflection. Although the Bulls are fond of people activities, now is a good time for a relative withdrawal into the quiet. This energy lasts off and on through

May. Consider the options for a vacation or two.



Gemini (May 20–June 20)

You have multiple aspects this week, several of which are at odds with each other. There are two aspects which demand you concentrate all your attention on serious matters. And there are two more

which call you to play and scatter your thoughts. Somehow you must work all these requirements into your life. Let me know how you do with that..



Cancer (June 21–July 21)

The aspects do not favor your forward motion at this time. You can try and try, yet not access traction. Since this is the dead of winter, I encourage you to make a fire, curl up with a lap robe and read a good

book. Dithering and worrying will only make you tired.



Leo (July 22–August 21)

You may have a relationship challenge this week near Friday. You and your partner may have values that are askew. Don't make a big thing of it. Talk it through and compromise or maybe it will work better if each of you can manage things

alone for a few days.



Virgo

(August 22–September 22)

Mercury continues to be unusually busy in the cosmic sky this week. Controversy can be found everywhere, personally and collectively. Don't accept everything you hear to be true. Some of it may be confused

or distorted facts and ideas. Double check information, especially if it is unexpected or startling. Rumors will be running rampant.



Libra (Sep. 23–Oct. 22)

Your ruling planet, Venus, enters the 7th house of relationships. Thanks to a retrograde loop, she will be gracing this territory off and on through the month of May. It is long

enough to study all the circumstances concerning partners and lovers in your life. You need to become more aware of how you affect others in your life.



Scorpio

(October 23–November 21)

It is time to shift gears and focus attention on organizing all the details of your life and work. Clean out file cabinets, closets, and drawers. Organize your computer files and create

a backup system. Keep your eyes on the target, the goal, or your daily regimen. If you pour energy into what you want for your life now, the rewards will be forthcoming later.



Sagittarius

(November 22–December 20)

Your planetary ruler, Jupiter, is turning retrograde and will be so for the next four months. This heralds a period of looking inward and seeking

the support of your Spirit as you move through this time. You may have a project that needs to be thoroughly examined before you move to bring it forth into the world in a few months.



Capricorn

(December 21–January 19)

Think carefully about what is truly important to you now, at this time in your life. Don't allow old habits or rules from the past to make your decision for you. If you allow that

happen, you will truly resent the outcome. Rise above your circumstances to a level that can see beyond your ego and the situation becomes more workable.



Aquarius

(January 20–February 17)

You want to challenge the rules or the authorities and this is not the time to expect success, regardless of the topic. You will be blocked, no

matter which way you present your desired outcome. Save yourself the trouble and settle your mind for the present. An opportunity will present itself later, at a better time.



Pisces (February 18–March 19)

You may have nagging thoughts that lurk in the background of your mind, causing minor anxiety. The problem is lack of needed information. Your planetary co-ruler is changing directions this week and

suggests that you may back away from a previously conceived plan. This seems like a good idea for the present. Give it some time before you take the risk.

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London-based expert discovers Alexander the Great's last will in an ancient Armenian manuscript



The fabled last will and testament of Alexander the Great may have finally been discovered more than 2,000 years after his death.

A London-based expert claims to have unearthed the Macedonian king's dying wishes in an ancient Armenian text that has been 'hiding in plain sight' for centuries, The Daily Mail reports.

The long-dismissed last will divulges Alexander's plans for the future of the Greek-Persian Empire he ruled.

It also reveals his burial wishes and discloses the beneficiaries to his vast fortune and power.

Evidence for the lost will can be found in an ancient manuscript known as the 'Alexander Romance', a book of fables covering Alexander's mythical exploits.

Likely compiled during the century after Alexander's death, the fables contain invaluable historical fragments about Alexander's campaigns in the Persian Empire.

Historians have long believed that the last chapter of the Romance housed a political pamphlet that contained Alexander's will, but until now have dismissed it as a work of early fiction.

But a ten-year research project undertaken by Alexander expert David Grant suggests otherwise.

The comprehensive study concludes that the will was based upon the genuine article, though it was skewed for political effect.

The revelation is detailed in Mr Grant's new book, 'In Search of the Lost Testament of Alexander the Great.'

He believes that Alexander's original will was suppressed by his most powerful generals, because it named his then unborn half-Asian son Alexander IV and elder son Heracles as his successors.

Rather than accepting the leadership of what the Macedonians saw as 'half-breed' sons, which would have been 'unthinkable', they fought each other for power in a bloody period of infighting and civil war known as the 'Successor Wars'.

It was in the decades following Alexander's death that Mr Grant now believes the original will was secretly rewritten and distributed in leaflet form by one of the competing generals to 'prove' the legitimacy of his own inheritance, as well as to damn the generals opposing him.

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HIGHLIGHTS

The publisher: NT Holding LTD
Circulation: 1500 print copies and
15,600 copies by e-mail list in PDF format
Տպված 2.25 մամուլ, տպարանակը՝ 1500
Լրատվական գործունեություն իրականացնող՝
ՀՀ Խղիկնգ ՍՊԸ
Գրանցման վկայականի համարը՝
03Ա898368, տրված 11.01.2013 թ.

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Layout: **Diana Grigoryan**
Համարի թող. պատ.՝ Մ. Հարությունյան
Weekly Newspaper, Since May 4, 1993.
ISSN 1829-0604
Registration certificate and the date:
273.110.00512, 15.12.1995

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