

REP. DAVIS ATTENDS THE CAPITOL HILL COMMEMORATION OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

WASHINGTON, DC (APRIL, 13, 2011) - REP. DANNY K. DAVIS (D-IL) ISSUED THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT AT THE SOLEMN REMEMBRANCE OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

As all of the previous speakers have pointed out, this commemoration of the Armenian Genocide is a most solemn occasion. I think it would be fair to say that recollection of these events evoke not just feelings of somberness and gravity but an overwhelming sense of painful loss and outrage.

Attempts to deny or challenge claims of genocides are illegal in some countries, while in Turkey it is illegal to refer to mass killings of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians by the Ottoman Empire towards the end of the First World War as a genocide. Why then do we hold these meetings if they bring us such personal discomfort?

For me there is a deep personal connection, one inexorably linked to my own history. The creation of the plantation system marked a new stage of capitalist development.

The immense wealth accumulated through the cultivation of cotton, tobacco and rice was done at the expense of African people whom they transported and enslaved for the sole purposes of forced labor.

There was no value placed on their lives other than as raw labor power. Slaves in earlier times enjoyed social and individual rights - like marriage, freedom to raise a family, to speak their own languages, and worship their gods. These rights were denied to the African slaves who were exported to America from their homelands in Africa. They were stripped of all humanity, even their own names.

Over 400 years and 54,000 slave ship voyages the total number of African abducted and enslaved is estimated to be about 30 million persons and of the 30 million persons that were stolen from the continent of Africa, only 10-15 millions arrived on the shores of the so-called "New World". How many others died due to unbearable living and working conditions, how many died seeking freedom will never be known.

That genocide has much in common with the genocides of the 20th century.

The Armenian Genocide is often considered the first genocide of the modern era because of the systematic, organized manner in which the killings were carried out. Historians now estimate that through wholesale massacres, deportations consisting of forced marches under horrific conditions leading to the death of the deportees, the use of rape and torture, the total number of resulting Armenian deaths was between one and one and a half million persons.

The Armenian genocide accompanying World War I was followed by the Nazi slaughter of six million Jews in the holocaust which accompanied World War II and in more recent years by the Rwandan Genocide and the Srebrenica Genocide.

The modern era is marked by the association of genocide with war and technology which makes it possible to exterminate large masses of people in relatively short time spans. It has also become more sharply associated with the use of modern propaganda tools to divide communities into "them and us," hate speech and dehumanization of entire socio-economic groups, often because of ethnic or religious identity and finally denial, where the perpetrators deny that they committed any crimes.

So I return to the question: Why then do we hold these meetings if they bring us such personal discomfort? Why is it that we gather here today in solidarity with the Armenian people to mourn and reflect on this unspeakable tragedy?

For me, the reason we ponder the lessons of the Armenian Genocide today, the reason we remember its victims and the reason we teach our children about these genocides is to remind us of why we should never permit it to happen again.

In this modern era this has become ever more critical because the world we live in today is far more dangerous, the tools of communication ever more powerful, and the technology of war ever more deadly, making it ever easier to build mass killing machines.

History, if it is to be more than the simple recitation of dates and names is what enables us learn from our past and plan how to live a better future.

For me remembering these horrific genocides must be more than talking about them. It must be more than simply saying, "Never again". Remembering these genocides must be about taking action.

It must be about taking it upon ourselves for all of humanity to ensure "Never again." If we don't, who will?

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