

Remembering Armenia

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By Rep. Anna Eshoo

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Serbia, Rwanda and the Jewish Holocaust stand as stark reminders in the American psyche of the brutality humankind is capable of committing against itself. But many Americans are not aware that these atrocities were preceded by another, equally horrendous act of barbarity against the Armenian people.

Eighty-nine years ago, in 1915, the Ottoman Empire began rounding up hundreds of Armenian leaders and putting them to death, a process that eventually killed 1.5 million Armenian men, women and children through forced death marches, mass burnings, rape and starvation. Another half million were forced into exile. It was the 20th century's first genocide, and it served as a prototype for future genocides. In justifying his regime's policies two decades later, Adolf Hitler was heard to say "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

Today, the 50,000 Armenian Americans in the Bay Area and others around the world are speaking out about this tragedy. Most are the children and grandchildren of those who survived the genocide, haunted by their loss and determined that not only will this crime never be forgotten, but that it never happens again.

But "never again" is a phrase that we have uttered too many times over the past century, whether in the bleak landscape of a German concentration camp, the killing fields of Cambodia, or the red clay hills of Rwanda. Too often it seems, the world's collective horror arrives too late, its sympathy tainted by the failure to act sooner, to act decisively. Our moral determination has seldom been matched by our political willingness to act.

Fortunately, history is not destiny. The African nation of Sudan is enduring violence that many believe could lead to genocide. The international community must be firmly united in demanding that both sides in this conflict allow full access by humanitarian aid organizations and the United Nations to the more than 1 million people at risk. If the killing is stopped, history shows that the Sudanese can survive the scarring of genocide, a crime that strikes not just a people, but a culture, language and history as well.

But the history of Armenia demonstrates that the healing process can take generations. Today, Armenia has a democratically elected government with strong ties to the United States. Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia,

Armenia has the potential to make tremendous strides in improving the quality of life for all its citizens. But regrettably, Armenia's economic development is hindered by continuing conflicts with Azerbaijan and Turkey, who blockade most of Armenia's borders, forcing all international trade to be delivered by air or to travel overland via Georgia and Iran. The United States has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to the people of Armenia and their country's security and development. U.S. technical and developmental assistance is an essential component of this effort and one I'm proud to support.

Ten years ago, the world stood aside while the killers in Rwanda implored their supporters to push on, declaring that "the graves are not yet full." Today, we stand with our brothers and sisters in Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia and Europe in our shared resolve that the horrors of genocide not be inflicted on another generation in Sudan. The graves are, indeed, too full. It's our responsibility as survivors and descendants of survivors to ensure that they are never filled again.

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[Return to Top](#)