

Obama is criticized for Armenian speech before he delivers it

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On Friday, April 24, Armenians will mark the 100th anniversary of what historians estimate to be the slaughter of up to 1.5 million Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War I. On Thursday, the Armenian Apostolic Church held services to canonize all victims and declare them as saints. Photo: AP Photo/Sergei Grits

WASHINGTON — Beginning in 1915, Ottoman Turks killed more than 1 million of the Armenians then living within the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire fell apart and became the country of Turkey. Today it is a close ally of the United States.

On Friday, President Barack Obama will give a speech in memory of those who died. However, he will not use the word "genocide" to describe the killings.

Genocide is the planned killing of a large group of people. Victims are targeted mainly because of their race or ethnicity.

"It Is A Betrayal"

The decision not to use the word goes back on a pledge Obama made before he became president. Armenian-Americans immediately reacted with anger.

“The president’s surrender represents a national disgrace,” said Aram S. Hamparian, head of the Armenian National Committee of America. “It is a betrayal of the truth.”

White House officials defended the decision. They said it was necessary to avoid offending Turkey, which is now a key ally. The United States is currently involved in several conflicts in the Middle East and needs Turkey's help to solve those problems.

The Turkish government says the mass killings should not be considered genocide.

U.S. Needs Cooperation

California has the country’s largest population of Armenians — more than 200,000 Armenian-Americans live in Los Angeles County.

California Representative Adam B. Schiff has led efforts in Congress to have the killings recognized as genocide. Schiff said he was “deeply disappointed” by the president's decision.

“How long must the victims and their families wait before our nation has the courage to confront Turkey with the truth about the murderous past of the Ottoman Empire? If not after 100 years, when?” he said.

Obama's remarks on Friday will underline “the historical significance” of the mass killings, a government official said.

“We know and respect that there are some who are hoping to hear different language this year. We understand” their point of view, the official said.

However, the official added that it is important not only to honor those who died in 1915, but also “to save lives in the present.” The United States needs cooperation from Turkey, particularly in dealing with the civil war in Syria. Therefore, it must avoid offending Turkey's government.

Some Will Say Genocide Anyway

On Tuesday, White House official Susan Rice met with Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and urged him “to improve relations with Armenia.” In addition, she said he should encourage honest discussion in Turkey “about the atrocities of 1915.”

The United States will send a group of officials to Armenia this week.

California Representative Jackie Speier will be one of the group's members. Speier said: “I intend to call it what it was — I will call it a genocide everywhere I go.”

Roughly 1.5 million Armenians were killed starting in 1915. At the time, the Ottoman Empire was falling apart.

The Turkish government says there was no official plan to wipe out Armenian populations. Therefore, they say, the killings do not meet the legal definition of genocide. Most historians, however, believe the use of the word is appropriate.

Coming To Terms

For years, the U.S. government has resisted using the word so as not to offend Turkey.

Activists had hoped Obama would break with the past this year. They became particularly hopeful after Pope Francis called it genocide just over a week ago.

Pope Francis and various European leaders have been "encouraging Turkey to come to terms with its past," said Bryan Ardouny, head of the Armenian Assembly of America. "We had hoped and expected that President Obama would have done the same."

In the past, Obama has supported using the term to describe the killings. When he first ran for president, he criticized President George W. Bush for not doing so.

Armenian genocide is a "fact" supported by "historical evidence," Obama said in 2008. "The facts are undeniable."