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Armenian National Committee of America

Haroutioun Bekirian, President  
A.R.F. Student Association

Nanor Nicolian, President  
A.R.F. Youth Organization of Canada

January 26, 2006

Dear Sirs and Madame,

We read the materials that you circulated regarding the destruction of cemeteries in Azerbaijan with great concern. As archaeologists who have amongst us over two decades of experience conducting archaeological investigations in Armenia and the South Caucasus, we are all deeply committed to preserving the region's rich heritage. It is quite clear from your activities at the Archaeological Institute of America annual meetings in Montreal that you also feel deeply committed to the heritage of the region as well and we applaud this commitment.

We were shocked by the documentation you provided of the destruction of the Djulfa cemetery and join you in condemning such actions without reservation. Such a systematic erasure of the past cannot be condemned strongly enough as both a violation of the memories of ancestors and as an assault upon the common cultural heritage of humanity.

The site itself primarily consists of burials from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. To our knowledge, there is no evidence at the site for an earlier presence. But this in no way diminishes the site's importance to human heritage nor lessens the crime of its destruction. As you note, the recent cultural atrocities that you have documented are only the latest assault on the site. Vandalism has been documented there since the 1920s, and more systematic attempts to eliminate the complex as a whole have been decried for the last two decades. A letter of complaint was circulated in the early 1980s with regard to this matter, addressed to the Soviet government in Moscow. And yet much of the site was destroyed between 1989 and 1991. The attack that you have painstakingly documented is sadly only the latest chapter in the site's modern history.

We know that your concern represents a real dedication to the principles of heritage conservation and in that spirit, we want to make you aware of the fact that Armenia's heritage is not only threatened in areas now beyond the direct control of the Armenian government. That heritage is in far greater peril within Armenia itself where industry, new construction, and the complete failure of the Ministry of Culture and key governmental institutions to provide any protection to endangered monuments constitute the greatest threat to Armenia's archaeological legacy.

Just a few recent examples:

- An entirely unique ancient Greek inscription on a boulder at the site of Armavir has been left exposed to the elements for decades even as new growth in a modern cemetery now threatens to destroy the stone entirely.
- New mines for tuff in the Sisian region have now destroyed an entirely unique site dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.

- A cemetery dating to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC was bulldozed in the village of Shaghat despite being very clearly marked as an archaeological site on maps provided to local and provincial administrators.
- Recently, tourists who visited Ani have witnessed massive explosions on the Armenian side of Akhourian River, which shake the monuments of Ani like an earthquake. The explosions are related to the exploitation of tufa quarries on the east bank of river. Efforts to question the damage that such explosions present to Ani have provided only endless evasions.

All of these sites and threats are known to the Ministry of Culture and yet none of the sites has been afforded protection. We are sure that you too are wondering how Armenia can decry the destruction of heritage in Djulfa or elsewhere if it ignores what goes on in Sisian or Armavir or the many sites that are now under threat. How can archaeologists raise a clamor to protect Armenian cemeteries in Djulfa if cemeteries in Shaghat fall under the blade of bulldozers?

We believe that the time has arrived for a coalition of archaeologists and concerned groups from around the world to bring attention to this issue within Armenia, the region, and the world. Armenia can and should lead the world on this issue, but to do so, to regain the moral high ground in the struggle to preserve humanity's heritage, requires vision, leadership, and collaboration. We, the undersigned, would be happy to help if you are serious about embarking on an effort to draw attention to the handling of heritage monuments in the region, including within Armenia itself.

The archaeologists in Armenia with whom we work are deeply dedicated to their jobs and to defending Armenia's archaeological resources. But they are outnumbered and without sufficient authority in the current governmental structure to effect real change. The Ministry of Culture, which bears this heavy burden, is under-funded and cannot protect sites from within its offices in Yerevan. We agree with you entirely—something must be done.

We, the undersigned, condemn the assault upon the cemetery at Djulfa and call upon the government of Azerbaijan to immediately commission an international team of conservators and archaeologists to restore the site. We have copied this letter (along with your documentation) to UNESCO, the World Monuments Fund, the Ambassadors of the United States to Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Ambassadors of Armenia and Azerbaijan to the United States, and to the Presidents of the Archaeological Institute of America, the Society for American Archaeology, the American Anthropological Association, and the European Association of Archaeologists. We call on these officials and organizations to lend their voices in condemning the destruction of the cemetery at Djulfa.

We also call for a broader dialogue on human heritage in the Caucasus and condemn all deliberate attempts to efface the material legacy of humanity's cultural heritage. We would ask you to join us in developing an international conference on heritage management in the South Caucasus that would draw together leading scholars from Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran, as well as the ministers of culture and preservation responsible for heritage management, to develop a set of agreed upon procedures for the preservation of archaeological heritage which would be presented to each government for adoption. A new effort is underway to develop an American Research Center of the South Caucasus, with branches in all three republics. This would be an excellent project to carry out under this organization's umbrella. The support and contribution of the leading international professional organizations, as well as of UNESCO, The World Monuments Fund, and other organizations would be critical to forwarding this mission.

We thank you again for bringing this tragedy to our attention. The publicity you hope to draw to the events in Djulfa provides an opportunity to re-evaluate how human heritage is being preserved in the South Caucasus. We hope that you will join us in seizing this opportunity to bring a positive commitment to heritage preservation from a tragic event.

Sincerely,

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cc.

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SAFE (Saving Antiquities For Everyone)