
Azeri Campaign Aims to Finance Settlement of Turks in Javakhk

BAKU (Combined Sources)--A campaign to finance the relocation of Meskhethi Turks to Georgia's Armenian-inhabited Samtskhe-Javakheti region has been launched by a Meskhethi association in Azerbaijan, Today.az reported.

The Vetan Association of Meshkhetian Turks inaugurated the campaign during the weekend with a roundtable discussion on the issue with deputies from Azerbaijan's parliament, heads of Azeri mass media, and public officials--all seeming to support the initiative.

A bank account has been established to facilitate the settlement of the Meskhethi Turks, who have lived in Turkey and Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The money collected will be used to finance the construction of homes, the organizers of the fund were quoted by Today.az as saying during the roundtable.

Speaking at the event, the chairman of the Azerbaijan-Georgia friendship parliamentary group, Ganira Pashayeva, praised the initiative and pledged her country's support to help the Meshkhetian Turks "settle in their historical lands."

"Personally, I have decided to transfer my deputy salary for January to the bank account along with the other assistance," she said, adding that the initiative will call upon the Azeri and Turkish Diaspora in the United States to help finance the settlement.

Another deputy, Agil Abbas, also pledged to donate her January pay to the fund. "Currently, Meskhethi Turks want to return to their lands and we must provide them with any support," she said. "Every deputy has to transfer a definite amount of money to the bank account."

The Deputy Chairman of Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Commission on Defense and Security, Aydin Mirzazade, similarly pledged to join the initiative by transferring "a definite amount of money to the banking account."

Meanwhile, the chairman of Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Commission on Social Public, Hadi Racabli, called for parliament to appeal to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for financial assistance in "the return of Meskhethian Turks to Georgia," adding that the same technique can be used later to "return Azeri refugees to their lands."

The establishment of the account comes after months of diplomatic silence on the issue. On a visit to Georgia late in 2007, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described the Meskhethi Turks as a "bridge of friendship and cooperation" between Turkey and Georgia. He said his government would assist in the return to Georgia of the Meskhethi Turks and "advocate projects that will assist the return of Meskhethi Turks to their homeland and ensure rapid development of the region."

At various instances over the last few years, Turkish, Georgian, and Azeri leaders have all called for the Meskheta Turks to be settled around the area of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which currently runs through the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

Although Turkey's government has long supported the settlement, an actual population transfer has yet to begin.

Many local analysts and community leaders believe the implementation of the settlement plan would cause severely negative consequences in the majority-Armenian region, with a population of roughly 238,000.

Samtskhe-Javakheti is situated in southern Georgia, bordering Armenia's Lori Province and is the Tayk region of historical Armenia.

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