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US court requests Turkey's defense in lawsuit filed by Armenian-Americans

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A United States court has granted Turkey 21 days to respond to a lawsuit filed by Armenian-Americans demanding compensation for property allegedly seized by the Ottoman government from its own Armenian subjects during the events of 1915. The case worth \$64 million concerns properties located near and under a U.S. airbase located in Incirlik in the southern province of Adana.

"This case is important, not only for the Armenian community but also the international one. It will set a precedent on the basis of the lawsuit that revolves around the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act, or FSIA. The Government of the Republic of Turkey is benefiting from the exploitation of these properties. As such they are to be held accountable for the consequences of their actions," lawyer Vartkes Yeghiayan told Hürriyet Daily News by e-mail.

The lawsuit was opened in 2010, to seek compensation from the Turkish state, Turkish Central Bank and the Ziraat Bank. Yeghiayan, the Armenian-American lawyer who took over the case on behalf of Rita Mahtesian, Anais Harutyunyan and Alex Bakalian, is also known for having filed a lawsuit that resulted in the French firm Axa and Oyak Insurance, a Turkish firm with links to the Turkish military, breaking off from a joint deal in 2005.

"In a related matter, we recently learned that the government of Turkey recently granted 3,800 euros to each of the 300 families that had filed a suit against it in Samsun some 50 years ago," said Yeghiayan, who further claimed that the following 21 days were going to be crucial not just for the three institutions on trial but for all people whose rights have been trampled upon by foreign governments worldwide.

"In this case our clients are able to sue the government of the Republic of Turkey, the Central Bank of Turkey and the Ziraat Bankası because of the following reasons: Turkey committed a violation of international laws and proceeded to illegally confiscate properties from their rightful owners in the process, Turkey also proceeded to violate its own constitution and the Lausanne Treaty. But more importantly, they have used these ill-obtained properties to run commercial operations," Yeghiayan said.

Bakalian, Mahdesian and Harutyunyan who also represent their respective families and relatives, are jointly in possession of some 11 title deeds located in the vicinity of Incirlik airbase, according to their lawyer. Yeghiayan also said they were contacted by other individuals with 15 more property deeds, while expressing his hopes that they, too, will join the case in the coming months.

Yeghiayan also partook in a suit filed against New York Life Insurance, which paid some \$20 million to Armenians in 2004. Over the preceding months, Yeghiayan assumed another case on behalf of the Center for Armenian Remembrance, or CAR, an Armenian charity in the U.S., and had requested information pertaining to property that was allegedly seized from Anatolian Armenians by the Ottoman government in 1915.

Ottoman Armenians took out policies regarding cargo transportation, sea travel, fire and life insurance from 103 foreign insurance firms before 1915, mainly from Europe and the U.S., according to Yeghiayan.

Armenia claims up to 1.5 million Armenians were systematically killed in 1915 in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey denies this, saying any deaths were the result of civil strife that erupted when Armenians took up arms for independence in eastern Anatolia.

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