

Armenian Furor Over PBS Plan for Debate

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LOS ANGELES, Feb. 24 — The Public Broadcasting Service's plan to show a debate after its documentary in April on the Ottoman Turks' massacres of Armenians has infuriated Armenian-Americans. The debate, which includes two people who deny that the massacre constituted genocide, has ignited an aggressive campaign against the network.

This week, United States Representative Adam B. Schiff, Democrat of Pasadena, Calif., whose Southern California district includes parts of the largest ethnic Armenian population outside Armenia, asked colleagues to join him in a letter to the network condemning the program.

A major Armenian lobbying group, the Armenian National Committee of America, has also asked PBS to cancel the program, which was produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting to accompany a new one-hour documentary, "The Armenian Genocide," scheduled to be shown on April 17. Organizers of an Internet petition against the half-hour discussion program said more than 11,000 people had signed it on the Web site.

In the latest twist to the controversy, the PBS station in Los Angeles, KCET-TV, said Thursday that it would broadcast neither the discussion program nor the documentary, making it difficult for most of the nearly 400,000 Armenians in the Los Angeles area to see either one. The station said it would show two other films dealing with the killings, mollifying some Armenians here.

PBS said that its 348 affiliates would decide independently whether to carry the film or the panel discussion and that it would not keep track of the decisions. Stations in Washington and in Plattsburgh, N.Y., which reaches the large Armenian community in Montreal, said they would run the film but not the panel discussion, while stations in Chicago and New York said they would run both.

Few topics among Armenians generate as much passion as the deaths of some 1.5 million Armenians by execution, starvation or disease during a World War I era campaign by Turks in the Ottoman Empire to wipe them out. Armenians have lobbied for decades for worldwide recognition of the atrocities as genocide.

Most historical accounts accept this view, but the Turkish government has denied for years that the deaths were a result of a state-directed effort to exterminate the Armenian

people and argued that the Armenian death toll has been inflated — and some historians agree.

A call to the Turkish Embassy spokesman in Washington was not answered.

In the past, the Turkish government, an important ally of the United States in the region, has hired Washington lobbyists to help defeat attempts by Congress to pass resolutions condemning the killings as genocide. Representatives of the Turkish government have suggested, among other things, that labeling them as genocide would jeopardize support for American military bases there.

President [Ronald Reagan](#) publicly called the killings genocide, but his successors, including President Bush, in presidential proclamations condemning the massacres, have avoided the term.

Unlike the dozens of other documentaries on the subject, the documentary for PBS, by Andrew Goldberg, includes rare clips of Turkish scholars acknowledging the anti-Armenian campaign as genocide as well as Turkish villagers recalling their ancestors' stories about participating in the killings.

"They caught Armenians and put them in a barn and burned them," a man in a town in eastern Turkey tells an interviewer.

Excitement swept through Armenian-American communities at word that PBS would broadcast the film, but anger quickly followed when it was announced that a taped panel discussion including people who dispute that genocide occurred would follow.

A call to Jacoba Atlas, a top programming executive at PBS headquarters in Alexandria, Va., was answered by Lea Sloan, a spokeswoman for PBS, who said the network "acknowledges and accepts that there was a genocide."

But it ordered the panel discussion, she said, to explore more deeply the question of why the Turkish government and its supporters continue to reject the genocide label.

"PBS believes that an essential part of its mission is to offer a forum for intelligent, rational conversation and informed debate and to bring that debate and help illuminate the issue through discussion," she said. She denied that the network acted under pressure from Turkey, which in the past has complained publicly about genocide-related programming on the network.

Mr. Goldberg said he played no role in the production of the panel discussion — which features testy exchanges using the words "myth," "fantasy" and "legend" — and said he found it unnecessary.

Moderated by the National Public Radio correspondent Scott Simon, it includes two people who deny genocide took place — Justin A. McCarthy, a history professor at the

University of Louisville, and Omer Turan, a history professor at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey — as well as two people advocating the recognition of genocide, Peter Balakian, a Colgate University humanities professor, and Taner Akcam, a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota.

Mr. Balakian said he participated only because producers told him that PBS would not show the documentary without it.

David Davis, vice president for national production at Oregon Public Broadcasting, declined to address Mr. Balakian's claim directly but said, "PBS did make it clear they felt the follow show was important, and we felt it was important as well."

Mr. Balakian, who wrote a bestselling account called "The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response" (HarperCollins, 2003), said he was still angry.

"I think the convening of the panel is morally wrong," Mr. Balakian said. "It should not have been done. I wrote an extensive letter to PBS, explaining why this is ethically wrong and why this is unnecessary and why it caves in to Turkish government denial."

Mr. McCarthy, however, said PBS was right to provide a forum for opposing viewpoints. He said the strife between minority Christian Armenians and majority Muslim Turks is complicated and misunderstood.

"I think the Muslims and Armenians killed each other," he said. "I don't think there was a central government-directed genocide."

Mr. Goldberg said he was surprised that KCET in Los Angeles would not show his film because it had shown his work before and had acted as host for a reception in 2004 where he sought the support of Armenian-Americans for his project.

The station said that on April 17 it will broadcast "Le Génocide Arménien," the American television premiere of a French documentary produced last year by Laurence Jourdan. During the month it will also show "My Son Shall Be Armenian," a 2004 Canadian-produced film it has shown before.

Mary Mazur, the station's chief programming executive, said the station decided on the French film not because of the controversy surrounding the panel but because it was stronger than Mr. Goldberg's film.

"It is illustrative of events which took place prior to World War I and might be less familiar to our broad viewing audience," she said.

Harut Sassounian, the editor and publisher of The California Courier, the Los Angeles newspaper serving the Armenian community that first spread word of the petitions and protests against the panel, said he was pleased that KCET decided not to broadcast the discussion and he approved of the films it had selected.

"This resolves for KCET and the community the panel discussion issue," said Mr. Sassounian, who said the chosen films were "excellent."

But he and other Armenian-Americans are still pressing PBS, and now its affiliates, to drop the panel discussion. It has also enlisted the rock band System of a Down, made up of Armenian-Americans from Los Angeles, which has posted links to the online petition on its Web site.

"PBS is a publicly funded entity," said Steve Dadaian, the Western region chairman of the Armenian National Committee. "They exist because tax dollars fund them. If they are going to use the network to give a national stage to this kind of hate, to denialists of the genocide, then we don't want our tax dollars going there."