

Melkonian students walk out as US group announces closure

...Cyprus risks USD 80 mln capital flight

Over 200 students of the Melkonian Institute walked out of their classes Tuesday after news emerged that a US-based foundation that runs the 78-year-old school in Nicosia has decided to shut it down in June 2005 and by selling the prime assets, whisk up to USD 80 mln out of Cyprus.

“Melkonian Not For Sale” students chanted at the main gate and in front of the founders’ mausoleum. They held placards condemning the sale and suggested this was a “second genocide”.

The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), headquartered in New York, which has been entrusted with the management of the Melkonian since 1928 has decided to close the historic school in 16 months’ time, without giving sufficient justifications for its move.

In an official announcement, the AGBU NY said that after “extensive deliberations and thorough assessment”, the Central Board has resolved unanimously to discontinue MEI in June 2005. This decision is based largely on the Board’s conclusion that MEI “no longer meets the challenges of its mission in the present context of the Armenian world.”

The decision is hotly challenged by the worldwide Melkonian Alumni, all Armenian Diaspora organisations, with the Cyprus Alumni employing all means to overturn the decision.

The Cyprus government, all political parties and leading Greek Cypriot personalities support the efforts of the Armenian community to keep the Melkonian open, since they consider the Melkonian as part of the national heritage and culture of the island.

Last month, the cabinet, headed by President Tassos Papadopoulos, allocated an additional aid package towards efforts to keep the Melkonian in Cyprus in a development which will further embarrass the US-based organisation, that until recently insisted that the Melkonian was not for sale.

Alumni representatives say the core issue is the prime land on which the Melkonian is located and the intention of the AGBU NY to sell the land and whisk up to USD 80 mln out of Cyprus, which it will use for unspecified purposes. They said that it also violates the provisions of the will, made by the Melkonian brothers, who established the school in 1926 initially as an orphanage for children surviving the Genocide.

The Alumni has sought legal advice from law firms in Cyprus and abroad and intends to incorporate international expertise to strengthen its defence as it moves to contest the decision and block the sale plans in courts.

“It is not just a matter of the sale of the land and the flight of some 80 million dollars to the U.S. in violation of a 1926 will by the founders, but also abuse of the rights of Armenian children who are being deprived of their human right to a fair education based on their cultural heritage,” says the Alumni.

The local Armenian community plans a mass demonstration next week, on March 24 in front of the Melkonian to show its disgust at the decision and to raise awareness among the Cypriot population to ignore a press marketing campaign employed by the US-based organisation in order to win support.