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The 7th International Conference on Railway History, successfully held in Istanbul, focused on the Past, Present and Future of long distance Rail routes linking Turkey to Europe, the Middle-East, Central Asia and the Far East

The conference, organised by the International Railway History Association (IRHA), together with UIC and Turkish State Railways (TCDD) and with the support of SNCF, provided a comprehensive overview of all long distance rail routes and corridors currently developed or planned to link Europe and Asia in particular along the New Rail Silk Road

(Paris/Istanbul, 7 November 2016) The 7th International Conference on Railway History organised by the International Railway History Association IRHA-AIHC in close cooperation with the International Union of Railways (UIC) and Turkish State Railways (TCDD), and with the support of SNCF, was successfully held in Istanbul at the historic station of Sirkeci where in the past the Orient-Express trains arrived from Paris. The conference was attended by historians, academics and researchers specialised in economy, geopolitics, transport and railway issues, from Turkey, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Sweden, Ukraine, India, China, together with high-level railway executives from Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey.

The title of the conference was "*Rail Routes from the Baghdad Railway to the New Rail Silk Road, 19th to 21st Centuries - Utopian Dreams, Past Achievements and Future Prospects for Rail Transport between Europe, the Middle-East, Asia and Far East*". The conference provided a unique opportunity to present all the ambitious plans, the failed or successful projects and the numerous achievements on long distance railway routes since the Baghdad Railway, the first Orient Express train linking Paris to Constantinople (Istanbul), the Hejaz Railway over Turkey, Syria and Jordan, etc., and in the recent period the Marmaray Tunnel under the Bosphorus in Turkey that created in 2013 the first fixed link between Asia and Europe and offered a continuous railway link between London and Beijing ...

Jean-Pierre LOUBINOUX, Director General of UIC, addressed participants at the conference opening with a video message. He said:

"This international conference on Railway History, with this theme of long distance rail routes and intercontinental corridors, takes place at the right place and at the right time....."

"At the right place because Turkey is currently one of the countries which demonstrate the highest degree of confidence in rail transportation as a solution for supporting economic and social development in the future. Turkey at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle-East and Asia, strongly invests in the development of its railways in all their components: development of the high speed rail system, construction of new railway stations, modernisation of conventional and freight lines, intermodal (rail ferry) terminals, important infrastructures such as the Marmaray Tunnel and more recently the third road and rail bridge linking Asia to Europe...."

"At the right time because the creation of long distance Euro-Asian rail corridors today has a high priority on the agenda of governments and international organisations dealing with transport issues such as the UN (UNECE, UNESCAP), OTIF, ECO, BSEC Organisation, EU, and of course professional railway organisations with UIC and OSJD. For example the creation and revitalisation of rail routes along the ancient Silk Road from Turkey to China are coming closer to reality".

In referring to the main conference theme, UIC Director General concluded: *"Dreams of yesterday are today's hopes and tomorrow's realities"*.

Ambassador Michael B. CHRISTIDES, Secretary General of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation BSEC – representing 12 Member States – addressed the conference participants in the opening session and underlined the importance of developing railways as an effective means of passenger and freight transportation, for the benefit of the economy and the population in the region, including the countries of the Black Sea region and neighbouring countries.

Ambassador CHRISTIDES mentioned in this context that the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation BSEC had recently signed a memorandum of understanding with UIC that should bring concrete measures in the near future.

Delegates were welcomed by Mr. Nihat ASLAN, Director of the 1st Regional Directorate (Istanbul) of Turkish State Railways (TCDD) (during the reception) and Mr. Halil KORMAZ, Deputy Director of 1st Regional Directorate.

Mr. Halil KORMAZ presented the impressive railway development plans and achievements currently ongoing in Turkey, including many connections with neighbouring countries along important rail routes and corridors.

Looking to the future, Dr. Mohammad Yamma SHAMS, General Director and CEO of the Afghanistan Railway Authority ARA, gave a comprehensive overview of railway development plans

for Afghanistan which will represent a hub at the crossroads of several long distance corridors along the Rail Silk Road. The "Lapis Lazuli" corridor should be inaugurated at the end of this year.

The ambitious plans and achievements of the Railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran RAI, including the participation of RAI at several important corridors – North-South and East-West Corridors – were presented by Mr. Abbas NAZARI, General Director International Affairs of Iranian Railways and Director of the UIC Regional Office for the Middle-East located in Tehran.

Technical visits allowed to discover the third – road and rail – bridge over the Bosphorus inaugurated in August 2016 (railway operations on this bridge will start later) , as well as the Marmaray rail service linking Asia and Europe through the tunnel under the Bosphorus, inaugurated in October 2013 and operated by TCDD.

The International Railway History Association IRHA-AIHC is chaired by Mr. Henri JACOLIN, diplomat, former Ambassador of France, vice chaired by Paul VERON, UIC Director of Communications, Coordinator for the Middle-East and Professor Javier VIDAL OLIVARES from the University of Alicante, Spain. Secretary General in charge of the scientific content of the conference, is Professor Dr. Ralf ROTH, History Department, Johann-Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, and Treasurer Professor Andrea GIUNTINI from the University of Modena, Italy.

The IRHA-AIHC association is open to professional organisations or individual members. Members are railway companies and railway foundations for history and railway heritage, railway archives, historians, academics, individual researchers and all persons interested in railway history and railway heritage.

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