



Washington

Selected News on Turkey

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Bypassing Senate, Obama Recess Appoints Ricciardone as Ambassador to Ankara

U.S. President Barack Obama late Wednesday bypassed the Senate and installed Frank Ricciardone as the new ambassador to Ankara, using a mechanism called a "recess appointment" to end five months without representation in Turkey. The Ankara post has been vacant since July when the previous envoy, James Jeffrey, left to take up his new job as ambassador to Baghdad. Since then Ricciardone has been unable to win confirmation from the U.S. Senate. All senior administration officials, including ambassadors, need the approval of the Senate, the upper house of Congress, to assume their posts.

With Obama's 11th-hour recess-appointment move, one of four naming new ambassadors, Ricciardone is now expected to take up his new post in the Turkish capital in early January. "This is very good news for our relationship with the United States," said one senior Turkish Foreign Ministry official. To remain in effect, a recess appointment must be approved by the Senate by the end of the next session of Congress - at the end of 2011 - or the position becomes vacant again. Despite the recess appointment, Obama is expected to continue to seek formal Senate confirmation in 2011 for the appointments of Ricciardone and other controversial ambassadors.

Obama initially nominated Ricciardone, a former U.S. ambassador to Egypt and the Philippines, for the post in Ankara on July 1. The diplomat won the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's backing July 22. But on the last day before the Senate went to a summer recess in August, influential Republican Senator Sam Brownback formally put a hold on Ricciardone's nomination, saying: "I am not convinced Ambassador Ricciardone is the right ambassador for Turkey at this time - despite his extensive diplomatic experience." Brownback's move effectively prevented a Senate floor vote on Ricciardone.

Also late Wednesday, Obama announced recess appointments for Matt Bryza to be U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan, Robert Ford to be U.S. ambassador to Syria and Norm Eisen to be U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic. The White House said in its recess-appointments statement that these "are posts that have been left vacant for an extended period of time."

Ricciardone most recently served as deputy ambassador and charge d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. He began his career in Ankara and Adana in Turkey,

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where he served twice again as political advisor to the U.S. and Turkish commanders of Operation Provide Comfort at İncirlik air base and as deputy chief of mission and charge d'affaires. He led the transition to an organization of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad in 2004, and the Department of State's Task Force in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. In addition, he served as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's special representative for the Transition of Iraq from 1999-2001. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Denies Report of Cyprus Deal with EU

Turkish officials denied Friday a television channel's claim that Turkey had reached a compromise with the European Union on opening its ports to Greek Cyprus in return for the opening of negotiation chapters in Turkey's EU accession process. "The news of a compromise with the EU to open our ports to Greek Cypriots is not true. Our conditions on this issue are known by all," Turkey's chief EU negotiator Egemen Bağış was quoted as saying by the Anatolia news agency. Foreign Ministry officials also denied any compromise reached with the EU. "Such reports are nothing new. They come up during each term presidency of the European Union," one Turkish diplomat told reporters.

The private Turkish channel NTV report announced that an agreement had been reached; it also said the formula could be implemented in the coming months if it is accepted by the Greek Cypriot administration. The Belgian presidency of the EU came up with the formula for the opening of 14 policy areas in Turkey's EU accession negotiations in cooperation with the EU Commission. Under the formula, Turkey would first open one seaport in İzmir or Istanbul to Greek Cypriot ships. If no problem is encountered in the first stage, Turkey would later open all its seaports and airports to shipping from Greek Cyprus, stated the report.

In return, the EU would open talks in eight suspended negotiating chapters and six other chapters unilaterally vetoed by the Greek Cypriots. According to the compromise plan, charter flights would start from European countries to Ercan Airport in northern Cyprus, though they will be restricted. There is speculation that Ankara received a written guarantee that no more obstacles will be put before the opening of the 14 chapters. NTV reported the EU now awaits the approval of the Greek Cypriot administration to implement the formula.

Ankara refuses to open its ports to Greek Cyprus unless the EU lifts sanctions imposed on northern Cyprus. Brussels froze eight chapters in response to Ankara's noncompliance in December 2006. These chapters deal with the free movement of goods; the rights of establishment and the freedom to provide services; financial services; fisheries; transport policy; the customs union; external relations; and agriculture and rural development. Greek Cyprus is also unilaterally blocking six other chapters - those on energy; education and culture; justice, freedom and security; the judiciary and fundamental rights; foreign security and defense policy; and the free movement of workers. The various blockades leave Turkey only able to open three more chapters: competition policy, public procurement and social policy and employment. /Hurriyet/

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CNN's Arabic Website Names Erdoğan 'Man of the Year'

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been named man of the year for 2010 by CNN's Arabic website. The website has announced that Erdoğan was chosen following a survey among its readers. Of those who participated in the survey, 74 percent voted for Erdoğan to make him man of the year, the Anatolia news agency reported on Saturday.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad followed Erdoğan on the list, getting votes from 20 percent of the participants. The website said Erdoğan was given the "man of the year" title thanks to his successful diplomatic moves. Erdoğan's popularity in the Arab world has increased dramatically in the Arab world in recent years as he emerged as the most outspoken critic of Israeli policies in Gaza in international political circles. In 2008, Erdoğan walked out of a World Economic Forum session after a heated exchange with Israeli President Shimon Peres over an Israeli offensive in Gaza. "When it comes to killing people, you know how to do it," Erdoğan told Peres.

Turkish-Israeli relations, once a strong alliance, took a nosedive following the Davos saga as Erdoğan continued to criticize Israeli treatment of Palestinians and called Israel the "main threat for peace" in the Middle East, eventually coming to the breaking point when Israeli commandos killed eight Turks and one Turkish-American during a May 31 raid on an aid ship trying to break the blockade of Gaza. Erdoğan's government also has built close ties with Iran, Israel's nemesis, and pushed for a diplomatic solution to a dispute between the West and Tehran over the latter's nuclear program.

Commenting on the Turkish premier's career, the website mentioned Erdoğan's stance in Davos, Turkey's contribution to efforts to remedy political problems in Iraq and Afghanistan and his acting as a mediator between Iran and the world, as well as Turkey's efforts to solve problems between Syria and Lebanon. /Today's Zaman/

Greece Plans to Build Barrier along Turkish Border

Greece announced over the weekend plans to build a barrier along its 206 kilometer border with Turkey to prevent the crossing of illegal immigrants. The barrier will reportedly be a 'wall' reminiscent of the one in existence between the United States and Mexico. Speaking to reporters, Greek's Minister for Citizen Protection Christos Papoutsis stated over the weekend, "We have finished the planning and we will begin in a few days' time." Noting that the project will be in conjunction with European border security agency FRONTEX, Papoutsis stated that Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou was also on board with the decision. "We believe that this plan will provide a significant hit to human smuggling networks." Noting that a similar wall was also being built between Israel and Egypt, Papoutsis underlined that, "Every day, between 200-250 people attempt to illegally cross the border in search of a better life in Europe."

Turkey's Foreign Ministry responded to the announcement with a statement, saying; "Every nation has the right to protect their borders." The Foreign Ministry also expressed that no country is obligated to inform another nation in order to do so. The Ministry of the Interior stated; "We are doing all that we can. The preventative measures adopted by

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Greece will not affect the work we have been doing. Our operations continue at full speed."

Edirne Governor Gökhan Sözer also commented on the news. Mentioning that the illegal immigrant issue has been on the agenda for a long time, Sözer explained, "The majority of illegal immigrants are from 40 different countries with a majority being from Somalia, Palestine and Burma. We have a 200 km border with Greece. Thirteen kilometers consists of land frontier, while the remaining is the Evros River. People are trying to get into Greece. A number of those people are being abducted by organizers. For a number of reasons pertaining to international and Turkish legislation, these immigrants are not arrested... the actual number of those that are deported is very low."

Emphasizing that the true struggle is against those that conduct immigrant smuggling, Sözer states "... In 2010, border units, gendarmerie and police forces arrested and processed 11,000 illegal immigrants. Greece does not need to tell us what preventative measures they intend to take. What matters for us is that the smuggling of immigrants is also our concern. The thing is, physical barriers can be overcome. Greece does not attend to their border in the way that we do. We have posts located every three kilometers. We have police forces, the gendarmerie as well as border units, however we do not witness such preventative measures being made on the other side. That may be the reason they plan to build a barrier." /Sabah/

Assad Meets with Top Turkish General to Discuss Military Cooperation

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Tuesday held talks on bilateral military cooperation between Turkey and Syria with Turkey's visiting Deputy Chief of General Staff Gen. Aslan Güner. Güner travelled to Damascus on the weekend to participate in a Turkey-Syria Military High-Level Dialogue Meeting. Assad and Güner focused on "strategic dialogue in the military field," and current cooperation between Syrian and Turkish armies during their meeting, the Anatolia news agency reported on Wednesday.

"The two sides discussed joint military training carried out by units from both armies and the possibility of expanding them to create common concepts in the face of various challenges," Syrian news agency SANA reported. The military dialogue meetings between Ankara and Damascus are being held within the framework of the Adana Protocol, signed in 1998. The land forces of the two countries staged, for the first time, a joint military exercise across the border in April 2009.

While in Damascus, Güner also met with Syrian Defense Minister Ali Habib Mahmud and Chief of General Staff Gen. Dawood Rajiha. The joint struggle against terrorism was reportedly the central topic of discussion during these talks. Turkey and Syria are currently working together against terrorist activities staged by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). /Today's Zaman/

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Turkey Declares 2011 the Year of Northern Cyprus

Seeking to promote Turkish Cyprus as a tourism hot spot, Turkey has declared 2011 the Year of Northern Cyprus. "We will promote Northern Cyprus as a destination to boost the number of tourists visiting the country," Culture and Tourism Minister Ertugrul Gunay told reporters Monday in a joint press conference with visiting Turkish Cypriot Prime Minister Irsen Kucuk. Turkey wants to share its deep tourism sector experience with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) so that it can live up to its employment, prosperity and development potential, Gunay stated. Tourism revenues in the TRNC rose 12 percent in the first 10 months of this year, while the number of visitors from Turkey to the island rose 15 percent, he added. Saying 2011 will be an important year for the TRNC tourism sector, Kucuk added that joint investments by Turkish investors and Turkish Cypriot entrepreneurs will strengthen both groups against competition. /Turkish Press Review/

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Turks See U.S., Israel as Biggest External Threats, Poll Results Show

Some 43 percent of Turks perceive the United States as the country's biggest threat, followed by Israel, according to a broad survey carried out in December by the MetroPOLL Strategic and Social Research Center. "This is the highest ratio ever on the external threat question among our surveys," Professor Özer Sencar, chairman of MetroPOLL, stated on Wednesday. "U.S. foreign politics since the Iraqi invasion, the hood incident [U.S. detention of Turkish soldiers during the Iraq war], the war in Afghanistan, repeated Armenian bills in the U.S. Congress and the negative statements that Turkish leaders make about the U.S. and Israel play a major role in this perception," Sencar explained.

The Ankara-based MetroPOLL survey company, which is affiliated with the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, surveyed 1,504 people in 31 provinces in December. The survey asked "From which country does the biggest threat come?" with 43 percent of Turks responding the U.S., followed by 24 percent who indicated Israel, 3 percent for Iran, 2.3 percent for Greece, 2.1 for Iraq, 1.7 for Russia and 1 percent for Armenia. Some 1.3 of participants said no country posed a threat to Turkey, while 18.9 said they had no idea. "It is interesting that Turkish people perceive an ally, the U.S., a country with whom Turkey has high-level, bilateral relations and is in NATO, as a threat," Sencar remarked, adding that Turkish people had not perceived the U.S as a threat in their previous surveys until the invasion of Iraq. He also said U.S. support for Israel was another source of the negative reactions.

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Sencar noted aggression toward Iran was another cause of the negative view. "This is not because Turks have friendly feelings toward Iranians. We asked participants if they were worried about Iran's nuclear threat. Some 70 percent said they were worried about it." Despite this trepidation at Iran's nuclear capability, the 3 percent of Turks who view the Islamic republic as a threat were dwarfed by the combined 67 percent who see the U.S. and Israel as threats, Sencar highlighted, adding that Iran's ratio had fallen over previous years.

In previous years, Armenia, Russia and Greece were perceived as the main external threats for Turks, Sencar said. "But their ratios have fallen to around 1 or 2 percent. Turks do not see them as enemies anymore," he said, adding that the "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy strategy of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was working.

Sencar also argued that statements from Turkish leaders like Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had a major impact on the "threat" perceptions of Turkish people. "The biggest support for the European Union is from the ruling party's voters. But 10 years ago, the EU was the biggest external threat for Islamist conservatives. It's because the ruling party supported the EU process" that people have been influenced to no longer view the bloc as a threat, he said. /Hurriyet/

Papandreou Remarks Highlight Unresolved Issues with Greece

Although the Greek and Turkish leadership underlined their mutual political will for resolving long-standing bilateral disputes last week, critical remarks by the visiting Greek prime minister clearly revealed that the two sides will have to exert further efforts to overcome these decades-old conflicts. Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou's strongly worded remarks critical of Turkey came on Friday evening as he delivered a speech at a gathering of senior Turkish diplomats in Erzurum. Earlier in the day, Papandreou and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan together opened the facilities of the World Student Games, the Winter Universiade.

"What is Turkey trying to prove?" Papandreou asked as he was addressing the Turkish ambassadors and complaining about what he said were violations by Turkish jets of Greek airspace earlier last week. "On Wednesday, eight Turkish planes flew over a Greek island," Papandreou said through an interpreter. "This might be routine for Turkey, but such actions lead Greek people to wonder whether Turkey is seeking a different course," he stated to the audience which included Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. "I believe that our destiny is in our hands, and I believe in Mr. Erdoğan. I have an extremely precious counterpart, and I believe that I can build first of all confidence and then a permanent peace between our countries," Papandreou declared on a more positive note. Directly addressing Erdoğan, the Greek prime minister said: "Mr. Erdoğan, I know that you are also ready for a new relationship of peace and cooperation. We are talking about a new era between Greece and Turkey; this is our joint goal. Our response to the question, 'War or peace?' is peace."

When his turn to give a speech came, Erdoğan responded to Papandreou in a mild tone, in a bid not to let the criticisms cast a shadow over the peaceful messages delivered by both leaders. "We have to find a solution to problems in the Aegean based on mutual benefits, and we will," Erdoğan said. "We have to get into the spirit of consensus; there

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is no reason why we cannot solve this," Erdoğan said, referring to Papandreou as a "friend." The website of the Turkish military says Turkish F-16s were intercepted twice by Greece's French-built Mirage 2000 jets on Wednesday southwest of the Greek island of Lesvos. The military said Greek jets intercepted have Turkish planes seven times since January 1.

The Aegean neighbors have a shaky relationship and came close to the brink of war three times between 1974 and 1996 over Aegean borders and the divided island of Cyprus. The rapprochement between the Turkish and Greek peoples after devastating earthquakes each country suffered in 1999 provided an impetus to intensify diplomatic efforts for the improvement of bilateral relations. But occasional accusations of airspace and territorial water violations as well as the Cyprus issue continue to mar relations.

Foreign Minister Davutoğlu on Saturday interpreted the exchange of messages between Erdoğan and Papandreou as a mutual declaration of the two sides' well-known positions. Davutoğlu, speaking to reporters in Erzurum, recalled that the two prime ministers, at a press conference following their speeches, highlighted that there is need for a new political lexicon in bilateral relations. "While improving this new political lexicon, there are situations where positions are mutually expressed more clearly," Davutoğlu said. "We will march together via exploring this new political lexicon and we will live together in this geography," he stated. When asked to comment on Papandreou's remarks describing Turkey as "an occupier force," in Cyprus, Davutoğlu said Erdoğan had given the necessary response to the visiting Greek leader. /Today's Zaman/

Israel's FM Seeks 'Frank' Talks with Turkish Counterpart

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman on Thursday invited his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoğlu to Jerusalem to iron out differences between the two countries, but warned that the Jewish state would not serve as a "punching bag" for Ankara. "We are seeking a return to a frank and honest dialogue with Turkey," he wrote in a Jerusalem Post op-ed article. "I invite my counterpart ... to Jerusalem, or any other location, where we can discuss all issues of relevance to both nations and the wider region... Allies can have disagreements; it is how we deal with these disagreements that are the true mark of any relationship," he added.

Israeli-Turkish ties have been strained for several years, but reached their nadir in May when Israeli naval commandos boarded six ships attempting to break Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip, resulting in the deaths of nine Turkish activists. Turkey is demanding that Israel apologize for the incident and pay compensation to the victims' families, a request Jerusalem has so far refused to meet.

In his op-ed piece, Lieberman said the crisis in relations with Ankara did not begin with the Mavi Marmara incident, but was "long predetermined" by Ankara and had its genesis in January 2009 when Turkish President Recip Tayyip Erdoğan verbally attacked his Israeli counterpart, Shimon Peres, at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He noted that some 100,000 people welcomed the Mavi Marmara back to Istanbul last month, chanting "death to Israel." "The lack of condemnation for these outrageous scenes from any official Turkish sources makes it extremely hard for us to show restraint," he stated. "We

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will not be a punching bag, and will react, as any other sovereign nation nation, to such insults and abuse." /Sabah/

Turkey Considering Iran's Invitation to Visit Nuclear Sites

Turkey is among countries that were invited by Iran on Tuesday to visit key nuclear facilities, officials said, noting that the invitation was conveyed to Turkey's permanent representative to the UN nuclear watchdog in Vienna. Iran's surprise invitation, which was also conveyed to representatives of Russia, China, the European Union and others, left out Britain, France, Germany and the United States -- the countries most opposed to its nuclear program. Turkish diplomatic sources, speaking on Tuesday evening, confirmed that Iran's permanent representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) conveyed an invitation to Turkey's representation in Vienna. The same sources said no final decision has yet been made and that Turkey is still considering its response to Iran's invitation.

Iran's move has been generally considered as a bid to show openness before Tehran and six world powers meet in İstanbul on January 20-21 to discuss its disputed atomic activities. In the letter, Iran said the visit could take place on Jan. 15 and 16. The West suspects that the aim of Iran's uranium enrichment program is to obtain nuclear weapons, while Tehran says it is for peaceful ends. None of the four major Western powers in diplomatic efforts to resolve the long-running dispute -- the United States, Britain, Germany and France -- received invitations.

The United States and Britain dismissed the Iranian move, as did Western analysts who viewed Tehran's gesture as a public relations exercise and said Iran would be more transparent if it gave international inspectors greater access to its sites. Hungary, the current EU president, said it was invited although EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton has represented the bloc in negotiations so far. "We are still trying to determine who is on Iran's invite list. We aren't," U.S. State Department spokesperson Philip J. Crowley told reporters. A U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity stated that neither the United States nor the EU3 -- European Union members Britain, France and Germany -- have been invited. "A fair number of invitations have been issued. The pattern is clearer regarding who is not invited -- the US and E3 -- than who is invited," said the official.

Last May, together with Brazil, Turkey brokered a nuclear fuel swap deal with Tehran in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to avoid new sanctions on Iran agreed to by the Security Council in June. Both countries voted against the sanctions and have said diplomacy is needed to solve the dispute over Iran's nuclear enrichment, which produces material that could be further processed for military use. /Today's Zaman/

Turkish Cypriot Leader Meets UN Envoy

Turkish Cypriot President Dervis Eroğlu met Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General Lisa Bittenheim on Wednesday to discuss the island's stalled reunification process. It was Eroğlu's first meeting on the island since undergoing heart surgery on Dec. 19. The meeting was closed to press. Special envoys of the Turkish and

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Greek Cypriot leaders also held a meeting as part of reunification talks, with Turkish Cypriot Kudret Özersay and George Iacovou discussing economic and European Union affairs during their two-hour meeting at the buffer zone.

Eroğlu and Greek Cypriot leader Demetris Christofias are scheduled to meet for the first time in 2011 on Jan. 12, prior to a three-way meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon slated for Jan. 26 in Geneva. Eroğlu and Christofias have held 18 meetings since last May addressing the subject of Cyprus' reunification, continuing a renewed attempt at finding a negotiated solution on the divided island that was first launched in September 2008.

Their last meeting took place on Dec. 15, with the two next meetings cancelled because of heart surgery Eroğlu underwent in the Turkish capital Ankara. In November, the leaders met with Ban Ki-moon, who called on parties to accelerate the talks. Ban said they decided to intensify talks in order to prepare a "practical plan" to eliminate disagreements. /Hurriyet/

Top Officials Reaffirm Turkey's Commitment to Full EU Membership

Speaking at a panel in Ankara Tuesday on Turkey's European Union accession process, Turkey's chief European Union negotiator and foreign and justice ministers reaffirmed Ankara's commitment to implementing reforms towards the goal of full EU membership, despite ongoing political obstacles. According to diplomatic sources, many of the panel members saw little recent progress in Turkey's negotiations. "The problems facing Turkish negotiations were discussed," reported one source. "It was agreed that the current picture isn't worse than it was at the 1997 Luxembourg summit."

The panel, hosted by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to mark five years of Turkey's official EU accession talks, was convened as part of a conference bringing together Turkish ambassadors from all over the world. The panel was also attended by Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin and chief EU negotiator Egemen Bagis. Addressing the panel, Davutoglu stressed that Turkey's objective is full EU membership, categorically rejecting Germany's so-called "privileged partnership" proposal. On the future of Turkish-EU relations, the three top officials said the Turkish public remains willing to join the EU, but negative signals from some EU member states have eroded public confidence that Ankara will one day be able to join the bloc, according to sources.

Bagis emphasized that 18 of Turkey's 35 negotiation chapters have been blocked for political reasons. "The blockage of more than half of the chapters is a first in the history of EU enlargement," he stated. "But our basic goal isn't opening or closing chapters or the number of opened or closed chapters but raising Turkey's standard of living." /Turkish Press Review/

Turkish Exports Hit \$113 Billion in 2010

Despite the turbulence in the European Union, Turkey's exports rose to over \$113 billion in 2010, according to data released Tuesday by the Turkish Exporters' Assembly (TIM). Speaking at a press conference in Ankara, TIM head Mehmet Buyukeksi said Iraq has

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become Turkey's fifth-biggest export market. The best-performing sector in exports was once again automotives, followed by textiles and chemicals. Turkey's exports rose 11.3 percent in 2010 compared to the previous year, to \$113.7 billion, according to TIM. Exports in December rose 21.3 percent year-on-year to \$11.56 billion.

TIM's press conference was attended by State Minister Zafer Caglayan and Foreign Trade Undersecretary Ahmet Yakici. Caglayan compared Turkey's potential to a "300-horsepower car that speeds up to 300 kilometers per hour, but one that needs a convenient highway." The driving force of exports was the automotive sector, as car exports rose 16 percent annually to \$17.38 billion. The textile sector posted an annual export rise of 10 percent, accounting for \$14.64 billion. The third-best performer was the chemicals sector, as its exports surged 32 percent to \$12.72 billion. Agricultural sectors accounted for 13.4 percent of overall exports, while industrial sectors accounted for 82.3 percent and mining for 3.22 percent.

The figures show that neighboring Iraq has become Turkey's fifth-largest export destination following Germany, the UK, Italy and France. Exports to "alternative markets" - the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, China, Syria and Azerbaijan - made up 21.5 percent of all exports. Caglayan said Turkey stands as the number seven country in imports to the European Union. "Our exporters are working, not talking," he said, adding that the December export figure is the highest monthly figure in 27 months. "The data show the increases in exports will continue," Caglayan stated, pointing to the government's 2023 target of \$500 billion in annual exports. /Turkish Press Review/

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Turkey to Join 'Contact Group', Look for Regional Solutions to Lebanese Crisis

A day after announcing its support for a French proposal to resolve the political crisis in Lebanon, Ankara has apparently bowed to pressure from Iran and decided to put forth its own inclusive "action plan" as well. The Iranian foreign minister made a statement Monday in Turkey criticizing the involvement of actors outside the region in the Lebanese crisis. His remarks came following the Turkish prime minister's announcement that he had been asked to join a French-led "contact group" on the issue and had accepted the invitation.

"We will be pleased to participate in and contribute to an international meeting, if it were to be held, but [we think] this regional momentum should continue," Foreign Minister

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Ahmet Davutoğlu told reporters Tuesday before departing for Lebanon, where he will join Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jaber al-Thani to hold talks with Lebanese authorities. Without the regional momentum, Davutoğlu warned, the process of finding a solution to the crisis in Lebanon would be very difficult.

Detailing Turkey's plan to stop the potential spread of the crisis in Lebanon, where the national unity government collapsed last week, to neighboring countries and the entire Middle East, Davutoğlu said being able to "see the frame" is most important. "The first [part of Turkey's approach] is to be able to provide healthy communication with all sides in Lebanon without any discrimination. The second is to keep regional actors, namely Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran and Qatar together in a healthy relationship," Davutoğlu outlined. "The third [part] is the Special Tribunal for Lebanon formed as a result of a UN Security Council resolution. That's why close contacts with France and the United States, two permanent members of the Security Council, are a must. All these are interrelated."

The Turkish foreign minister also warned that events in Lebanon could bring about regional consequences that could hurt the already-fragile stability of the Middle East. "Thus Turkey, due to the importance it places in regional peace and comfort, sees taking every adequate step as necessary," he said. "We can't be a mere spectator as this brother country's drifting into a crisis."

Davutoğlu's statements on the action plan followed an announcement Monday by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that he had received an invitation from French President Nicholas Sarkozy to an international meeting that Turkey would be pleased to join. The French proposal suggests the formation of a "contact group" for Lebanon with the participation of Syria, Turkey, France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

On the same day Turkey accepted the French proposal, Iranian interim Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi paid a visit to Ankara, where he said the engagement of non-regional actors in the Lebanese process would not produce stability in the region. "We see no efficacy in the intervention of outside actors to this issue," Salehi told Turkish reporters late Monday at a joint press conference with Davutoğlu. The Iranian minister arrived in Ankara late Monday to discuss the Lebanese crisis and the upcoming talks in Istanbul on Tehran's nuclear program.

The assurance that Iran will not be excluded was given Tuesday by Davutoğlu, saying, "Turkey will continue its efforts without excluding any actor from the process." Noting that Turkish, Syrian and Qatari authorities have agreed to act together for a solution that would bring stability to Lebanon, Davutoğlu also reported he held phone calls with his French and Qatari counterparts early Tuesday. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Expands Cooperation with Yemen

On the occasion of the first-ever presidential level visit from Turkey to Yemen, the two countries have secured cooperation through the signing of several bilateral agreements, including one to abolish visa requirements between the two nations. President Abdullah Gül's two-day visit to Yemen, which ended on Tuesday, came at a time when the Arabian Peninsula country is facing a series of major threats, including rising al-Qaeda militancy,

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violence from southern secessionists and sporadic clashes with Shiite rebels, all fed by crushing poverty.

"The fight against terrorism is a joint problem for the world. International cooperation is very important in this matter. Turkey will be with Yemen on this issue," Gül was quoted as saying on Tuesday at a joint press conference in Sana'a with his Yemeni counterpart, Ali Abdullah Saleh. "Turkey will continue making all kinds of contributions to Yemen's democratic and economic development," Gül declared, as he noted that Ankara has been closely following reforms implemented by Yemen.

Pledging efficient implementation of the bilateral agreements signed with Yemen -- which includes communication, media, defense, telecommunications services and diplomatic training -- Gül lounded the fact that Turkish and Yemeni people could now visit each other without needing visas. Turkey has signed agreements with many countries in recent years to abolish visa requirements, including with Syria, Lebanon, Serbia and Croatia, in its efforts to boost regional cooperation. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was among the delegation accompanying Gül in Yemen, postponing a scheduled visit to Iraq.

Gül and Saleh on Tuesday pledged to lend support to the Palestinian people, with the former describing the Palestinian cause as a "common cause" for the entire region. "Regional stability is very important for the Arabian Peninsula as well as for the Middle East and Africa. Our policies and views are common and I find this very important," Gül said. "Additionally, we have stated during our meetings that the Palestinian cause is cause for all of us, not only for Palestinians, and that we will continue to strongly support this cause until the an independent Palestinian state is founded in its own territories," he stated. For his part Saleh praised the support of the Turkish people for the Palestinian cause, calling it "worthy of commendation."

Yemeni media reported that during the talks, Turkish and Yemeni officials also put the finishing touches on a project for Turkey to build an industrial zone in the Hodeidah province, and discussed ways of expanding cooperation in the fields of education, culture, and the restoration of fortresses and Turkish monuments in Yemen. During the visit Gül also inaugurated a renovated cemetery for fallen Ottoman soldiers. /Today's Zaman/

Erdoğan's Visit Marks New Era in Ties with Kuwait, Qatar

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan arrived in Kuwait on Monday for talks with leaders of the oil-rich Gulf state aimed at boosting economic and political relations. Wrapping up his visit Tuesday, Erdoğan, accompanied by a 500-strong official and business delegation, then proceeded to Qatar for a consecutive visit. "Turkey has historical and cultural ties with both Kuwait and Qatar and has a political will to improve bilateral relations with all Gulf countries," Erdoğan told reporters ahead of his departure from Ankara late on Sunday, while expressing hope that his visits will help build regional peace and stability.

State Minister Zafer Çağlayan, responsible for foreign trade, has underlined the economic aspects of the prime minister's visits to Kuwait and Qatar, as he drew attention to huge opportunities introduced by both of these countries to Turkish entrepreneurs in regards

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to exports, joint investments and contract services. Recalling that Erdoğan was expected to sign a memorandum of understanding between Turkey and Kuwait in the field of industry, Çağlayan told reporters on Monday that the Gulf region has always been a vital commercial base for Turkey.

Both Kuwait and Qatar are significant commercial centers, Çağlayan added. "We are here because we aim at further diversifying opportunities of commercial and economic cooperation between Turkey and these two countries, for expanding the market shares of Turkish companies and for creating opportunities for cooperation in the upcoming period's infrastructure and superstructure projects as well as in the fields of investment and contracting," he stated.

Erdoğan held separate talks with Kuwaiti Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwaiti Prime Minister Nasser Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Sabah and National Assembly Speaker Jassem Mohammed Al-Khorafi after being welcomed by the prime minister at an official ceremony held at Bayan Palace. Arab and Turkish parliamentarians also opened a two-day meeting to review ways to boost bilateral cooperation on Monday, while Erdoğan took part in a two-day conference on Arab-Turkish relations. /Today's Zaman/

EU's Ashton Visits Turkey Ahead of Iranian Nuclear Talks

European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton met with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu Thursday ahead of this week's nuclear talks between Iran and world powers in Istanbul. Davutoglu and Ashton also discussed Turkish-EU relations as well as regional and international issues. In a press conference afterwards, Davutoglu characterized their discussion as positive but added that Turkey would still "like to see a stronger will on the part of the EU" towards accession. He also criticized the current slowdown of accession talks, saying that it shows "a lack of vision on the part of the EU."

This was Ashton's first visit to Turkey in her new role as head of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's foreign ministry and diplomatic corps. At the press conference, Ashton said that in her new role, she is "keen to have the right strategic dialogue with Turkey." While the talks come just one week before the Iranian nuclear meetings in Istanbul, Foreign Ministry spokesman Selcuk Unal reiterated that Turkey is only hosting the meetings and serving as mediator. Asked what role Turkey would play in the meetings, Ashton reiterated that Turkey would not have a stake in the negotiations. /Turkish Press Review/

Disappointed by Merkel's Cyprus Remarks, Turkey Calls for Fairness

Remarks made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel putting the blame on Ankara and the Turkish Cypriots for the absence of a breakthrough in Cyprus sparked a reaction from both Turkish and Turkish Cypriot leaders, who found Merkel's assessment unfair and unacceptable. "Germany is a very important ally for us and its convictions are important for us," Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu first noted on Wednesday when asked about Merkel's remarks at a joint press conference with visiting Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia. "We have always wanted Germany to play a more active

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role regarding Cyprus because we thought that it would make a positive contribution. However, Ms. Merkel led to a serious disappointment in regards to this conviction," Davutoğlu stated.

In the first visit by a German leader to the divided island, Merkel on Tuesday lauded Greek Cypriot leader Dimitris Christofias for "courage and creativity" in talks with Turkish Cypriot leader Dervis Eroğlu. But she scolded the Turkish side for failing to keep up with Christofias in peace efforts, while also urging Turkey to open its ports and airports to traffic from Cyprus, a European Union member since 2004. Turkey refuses to do so, urging the EU to first end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots as it promised back in 2004, following a referendum on a UN reunification plan.

"I guess Ms. Merkel has forgotten what she said. It was herself who said that 'it was wrong to admit southern Cyprus into the European Union'," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told reporters late on Tuesday while on an official visit to Qatar. "Ms. Merkel probably assumes that the Cyprus issue is a process that has been in place only since she came to power. She does not know about the history of the Cyprus issue. I call on her to research its history and have tea with [former German chancellor] Gerhard Schröder," Erdoğan stated.

In Lefkosa (Nicosia), following a new round of talks with his Greek Cypriot counterpart, Turkish Cypriot leader Eroğlu said Merkel "was commenting via looking at north Cyprus from behind the UN observation posts at Ledra Palace in the buffer zone." Eroğlu and Davutoğlu separately called on Merkel to make an assessment of the state of affairs in Cyprus only after listening to both Greek and Turkish Cypriot sides. "In the last two years, all positive initiatives came from the Turkish side. If Ms. Merkel had listened to both sides, she would probably not make such a one-sided statement. We trust her and her leadership very much. I hope she will listen to the Turkish Cypriot side in the coming period and assume a more fair and objective approach on this issue," Davutoğlu stated.

In a statement, the Foreign Ministry said Merkel was "misinformed" by the Greek Cypriot leadership about the status of settlement efforts in Cyprus, noting that the UN also confirms that the Turkish Cypriot efforts have played a significant role in bringing about the progress achieved so far. "It would be useful if Merkel is informed by relevant sources, including most notably the UN, about the state of the negotiation process in Cyprus," the statement said. /Hurriyet, Today's Zaman/

Turkey to Increase Arms Spending in 2011

Turkey is scheduled to spend approximately \$4.5 billion on arms procurement in 2011, up about 10 percent annually, while most European countries are slashing defense budgets, a senior procurement official said on the weekend. "This year we have a major payments schedule for ongoing and starting programs," said the official on condition of anonymity. "An overall procurement spending of \$4.5 billion is a reasonable figure for the year." Last year, Turkey spent slightly more than \$4 billion on procurement. "We also expect procurement spending to rise gradually in the upcoming years," the official reported.

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Turkey's major procurement programs spanning the next 10 years will include the purchase of around 100 F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Lightning II aircraft worth around \$15 billion, the purchase of 30 F-16 Block 50 fighters and the modernization of its fleet of F-16s, the acquisition of six modern U-291-type submarines costing \$3 billion, the purchase of utility and attack helicopters worth over a total of \$7 billion, the building of long-range air and missile defense systems worth several billion dollars, as well as the development and production of a national battle tank worth several billion dollars. Some smaller programs include the purchase of frigates, corvettes, armored vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles and trainer aircraft.

In late December the Turkish Parliament endorsed a budget of \$11.3 billion for the Defense Ministry, up from last year's \$10.5 billion. The 2011 budget appropriations for the ministry account for 1.4 percent of Turkey's gross domestic product and 5.4 percent of the overall state budget, according to Defense Minister Vecdi Gönül. Overall, the Turkish security forces will receive additional funds worth around \$1.1 billion, bringing total spending to \$15.51 billion, or a nearly 8 percent increase compared to last year. These figures exclude contributions from the country's special Defense Industry Support Fund, which helps finance arms purchases.

The Turkish procurement spending spree comes at a time when most European countries are cutting their defense budgets. "The threats Turkey faces are multiple and varied compared to most European states," the procurement official stated. "Our geopolitical and strategic realities more than justify the spending increase." Some of the programs based on the acquisition of foreign technology, in addition to weapons systems, aim to provide the local industry with the capabilities Turkey needs to independently possess in the future, he explained. /Hurriyet/

TUSIAD Highlights

TUSIAD's 41st Annual General Assembly meeting will be held on Thursday, January 20 at the Istanbul Ceyhan Intercontinental Hotel. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will address the assembly as guest of honor, and TUSIAD High Advisory Council President Mustafa V. Koç along with TUSIAD Chairwoman Ümit Boyner will open the meeting with speeches. TUSIAD's program over the past year will be reviewed along with elections for the High Advisory Council.

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Turkey Dismayed by Israeli Report on Flotilla Raid

Turkey stated on Sunday that it was "appalled and dismayed" at the findings by an Israeli inquiry that cleared the Israeli government and military of wrongdoing in a raid on a Turkish aid ship bound for the Gaza Strip. Turkey said its own panel's report into the May 31 incident, which it submitted to a UN inquiry in September, had found that Israel's blockade on the territory and "attack against the humanitarian aid convoy" had violated international laws. "Our Commission is surprised, appalled and dismayed that the national inquiry process in Israel has resulted in the exoneration of the Israeli armed forces, despite all the facts that have also been confirmed by the International Fact-Finding Mission," Turkey's Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "Israel's attack against the humanitarian aid convoy, which violated both wartime and peacetime international law, has also trampled all international principles, rules and norms with the manner in which it was conducted."

The statement also argued Israel's decision to make the panel's findings public before submitting it to the United Nations was "unconstructive" and because of that it had decided to make public its own inquiry. Nine pro-Palestinian Turkish citizens were killed after Israeli marines boarded the Mavi Marmara on the high seas after it ignored orders to turn back. "While it had the possibility of intercepting the convoy carrying unarmed civilians without causing bloodshed, Israel opted for a course which made loss of life inevitable," Turkey stated in its report. "Instead of employing numerous established means of interdiction such as firing across the bow or disabling the rudder, Israel chose to first intimidate and terrorize the passengers, and then to raid the ships in the darkness with lethal force... While Israel should have re-assessed the situation upon the passengers' exercise of self-defense, and had ample time to do so, it chose, on the contrary, to attack with increased violence." The Turkish report also said, "Israel's so-called 'maritime blockade' against the Gaza Strip is devoid of legal basis and legitimacy."

Turkey, which had maintained a close relationship with the Jewish state in the past, has demanded an Israeli apology for the raid and compensation for the casualties. Israel has so far rejected these demands. /Sabah/

Solution to Crisis is Up to Lebanon, Turkey Says

Turkey and Qatar announced Thursday that they have suspended their efforts to break the deadlock between rival parties in Lebanon's political crisis, saying it is time for the Lebanese groups to discuss a solution. Despite the announcement, Ankara remains engaged with the crisis that erupted after the collapse of Lebanon's national unity government, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said at a press conference Thursday. "After two days of intensive talks with the parties in Lebanon... we realized there were still reservations [from the Lebanese side]. That is why we [the foreign ministers of Turkey and Qatar] decided to return home," Davutoğlu explained after meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, at Istanbul's Çırağan Palace.

The announcement by Turkey and Qatar came a day after Saudi Arabia abandoned its efforts in Lebanon, saying it would no longer attempt to mediate in the crisis and warning of a dangerous situation that could lead to the partitioning of the multi-faith country. Speaking after two days of talks in Beirut with Lebanon's political leaders, Davutoğlu

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repeated his support for the Syrian-Saudi initiative to resolve the current crisis in Lebanon. The initiative reportedly calls for Lebanon to disavow a UN tribunal probing the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in return for guarantees from the Shiite militant group Hezbollah concerning its weapons arsenal. Lebanon is mired in a deep crisis over a dispute between the Saudi and U.S.-backed caretaker Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri - son of the slain ex-premier - and the Iranian and Syrian-backed Hezbollah over the United Nations probe. Political sources said the working draft drawn up by the foreign ministers of Syria and Saudi Arabia had been submitted overnight to Hezbollah, according to an Agence France-Presse report.

Turkish and Qatari foreign ministers met separately Tuesday with al-Hariri, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and parliament speaker Nabih Berri. They also met Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, who lives in hiding for fear of assassination. "We did all we could and presented them with a draft [on how to resolve the crisis], but the final decision depends on Lebanon's side," Davutoğlu stated, adding that Turkey was ready to keep contributing to the process should the parties come up with a new approach for a solution. He also said they had consulted other world leaders, including those from the United States and the European Union, on the issue ahead of the talks. "However, [we believe] that the parties in Lebanon must think over [and look for a solution], rather than us looking for more ways [to contribute]." Davutoğlu said. The Turkish foreign minister added that finding a solution was crucial not only for Lebanon, but also for the entire region. "We hope the crisis does not expand regionally, and a solution in accordance with all constitutional and democratic parameters is found."

On Monday, the prosecutor of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon submitted a sealed indictment in the case, which is now being reviewed by a judge. Hezbollah has said it expects some of its members to be implicated by the tribunal, which it accuses of being part of a U.S.-Israeli plot. The Shiite party, the most powerful military force in Lebanon, led to the collapse of al-Hariri's government two weeks ago because of the dispute. /Hurriyet/

New U.S. Ambassador Arrives in Ankara

Francis Ricciardone, the recently appointed United States ambassador to Turkey, arrived Thursday in Ankara six months after his predecessor left Turkey. Ricciardone, who served previously in Turkey, is expected to present his letter of credentials to President Gul and lay the groundwork for a visit next month by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. "We look forward to seeing our old friends and making new ones," Ricciardone told reporters, speaking in Turkish at Ankara's Esenboga Airport in his first press appearance. Ricciardone has already served in Turkey twice and is a known expert on the Middle East. "Turkey is a very important country," he stated. "With each passing day, Turkey becomes more influential. As President Obama has said: my new job is to renew the alliance between our nations and the friendship between our people."

A group of some 40 protestors also demonstrated at the airport Thursday against the United States. "We will call those who put Turkish soldiers' heads in hoods to pay," they chanted, referring a 2003 incident when U.S. forces detained several Turkish Special Forces soldiers in northern Iraq. The group also said they oppose Turkey joining a U.S.-backed missile shield project. /Turkish Press Review/

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U.S. Official Meets with Cypriot Leaders

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon had talks Thursday with Greek Cypriot President Dimitris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Dervis Eroğlu to appraise long-running reunification talks, just days ahead of key Geneva talks under UN mediation. In a press briefing on Tuesday, U.S. State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said Gordon's trip was an opportunity to speak directly to the leaders of the two communities and their advisors. Gordon also met with the UN secretary-general's special envoy to Cyprus, Alexander Downer, and his team during his visit. "But we reiterate our support for their efforts to reach a solution that will reunite the island as a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation," Crowley added.

Eroğlu and Christofias are currently discussing the most thorny issue in the peace talks, the property issue, which observers believe would push forward the talks if a breakthrough in this particular topic is achieved. Out of six topics, only the judiciary area has been agreed upon by the leaders thus far. In a bid to give momentum to the peace talks, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon mediated a trilateral summit in New York on Nov. 18, where leaders only agreed to continue talks in Geneva on Jan. 26.

Noting that the U.S. is focused on the situation in Cyprus, Crowley said the State Department has been engaged on this since the Obama administration came to office. "We've had discussions here in Washington. But this was a good time for Assistant Secretary Gordon to see the situation on the ground firsthand," Crowley stressed. Meanwhile, in a written response to a question on Cyprus by a reporter on Thursday Crowley said that the U.S. is not a participant in ongoing talks between Cyprus' leaders on reunifying the divided island and that the U.S. will not participate in trilateral talks between Cyprus' leaders and the UN Secretary-General in Geneva on Jan. 26. Crowley also reiterated the U.S. position on Cyprus talks, noting that the U.S. strongly supports peace talks aimed at reunifying the island based on a bi-communal and bi-zonal federation. /Today's Zaman/

Turkey, Russia Accelerate Cooperation

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov arrived in İstanbul on Wednesday for a two-day official visit during which the Black Sea neighbors took concrete steps to deepen their strategic bilateral relationship. During the visit, Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoğlu, co-chaired the first meeting of the Joint Strategic Planning Group as part of preparations for an upcoming meeting of the High-Level Cooperation Council between Russia and Turkey -- an intergovernmental cooperation mechanism. Russia and Turkey agreed last year to launch the Council, a body that is to be led by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and will meet annually to review ties between the two countries.

"During meetings to be held during the visit, a comprehensive exchange of views is planned in order to address progress that has been made recently and new opportunities of cooperation in relations between the two countries as well as on important regional and international developments," the Turkish Foreign Ministry said in a written statement released late on Tuesday.

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Before his visit to İstanbul, Lavrov accompanied President Medvedev during a Middle East tour which covered the Palestinian territories and Jordan. The Russian minister's visit also came just before İstanbul hosted talks Friday and Saturday between Iran and the UN Security Council permanent members China, France, Russia, Britain and the United States, plus Germany.

Following Lavrov's visit, Ankara and Moscow will witness a flurry of mutual visits. In mid-February, Russia's State Duma Interparliamentary Friendship Group with Turkey will visit Ankara. Also next month in Ankara, Turkish and Russian officials will hold a meeting of the Social Forum as part of exercises within the framework of the High-Level Cooperation Council. On March 2-3, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin and Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız will co-chair a meeting of the Joint Economic Commission between the two countries which will be held in Kazan. In mid-March, Prime Minister Erdoğan is expected to pay an official visit to Moscow at the invitation of his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.

Ahead of Lavrov's visit, Turkish and Russian officials on Tuesday signed in Moscow a readmission agreement, a step that brings the two countries closer to introducing a visa-free travel regime for their nationals. The agreement will enter into force simultaneously with a visa exemption agreement that was signed in May 2010. /Hurriyet, Today's Zaman/

Turkey, Argentina Agree to Boost Ties

Turkey and Argentina have agreed to enhance their relationship in all fields despite the geographical distance separating the two during a visit by the Argentine President. "It's very important that both countries' political will is to move ties forward. Argentina's decision to open a consulate in İstanbul is important evidence in this direction," President Abdullah Gül told reporters at a joint press conference with visiting President Christina Fernandez de Kirchner. The two presidents signed two protocols on civil aviation and cooperation between the two countries' diplomatic academies.

Kirchner arrived in Turkey as part of regional tour that included Qatar. The two countries have had bitter quarrels in the past as Argentina recognized the Armenian genocide claims and adapted its history textbooks accordingly. But the leaders preferred not to talk about this problem during Thursday's meetings and instead focused on how to develop ties.

Recalling that both countries are members of the prestigious G-20 club, Gül underlined the need to capitalize on the two countries' economic potential for the advantage of the two nations. "We want to increase mutual investments. Some Turkish companies have already invested in Argentina. I hope that Argentinean companies will invest here," he stated. Gül also stated that thanks to the protocol signed Thursday, direct flights between the two countries would soon commence in a move to bring Turkey and Argentina closer. "You know about Turkey's new opening toward Latin America. Visits to the region have increased and we have opened new embassies and sent representatives. Our trade is increasing and so are our political consultations," Gül said.

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For her part, Kirchner touched on how both countries' economies have been growing in the last decade and how Turkey and Argentina could protect themselves from the devastating global economic crisis. "In 2010, we celebrated the 100th year of the establishment of our diplomatic relations," she recalled. "We have special ties." In addition, the Turkish-Argentinian Business Forum convened Friday in Istanbul, where the two countries' businessmen had the opportunity to meet each other and discuss opportunities for investment and trade. /Hurriyet/

TUSIAD Highlights

A TUSIAD delegation led by TUSIAD Chairwoman Ümit Boyner met with Argentine President Christina Fernandez de Kirchner at the Istanbul Conrad Hotel on Friday within the framework of her state visit to Turkey. Turkish-Argentinian economic relations as well as bilateral investment opportunities were discussed during the meeting.

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Erdoğan, Obama Agree to Work Together in Egyptian Unrest

With continuing unrest in Egypt, United States President Barack Obama called Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan early Sunday to discuss ways of working together to prevent the entire Middle East from falling into deep instability. "[Turkey and the U.S.] have agreed on the necessity of meeting the legitimate and democratic rights of the people in the region," read a statement issued by the Office of the Prime Minister Sunday.

According to the statement, Obama and Erdoğan urged leaders of regional countries not to use force against their people. "These incidents should not bring about deep and ingrained instability. [Turkey and the U.S.] have shared concerns that instability could cause detrimental consequences in the region," it said. The statement said Obama made the call because he valued how Erdoğan, the winner of successive elections in successfully democratic Turkey, was evaluating the developments. The statement said the two leaders agreed to stay in close contact in order to properly assess the situation.

The short statement also highlighted a number of points where the two nations' positions bore similarities. The first point was that both Ankara and Washington saw peoples' revolts in the region as legitimate and that their democratic demands should be met. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who is set to meet his U.S. counterpart Hillary Clinton next week in Turkey, confirmed Turkey's position in a statement Friday. The

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second important intersection between the two countries was that neither side desired to see already fragile stability being hurt by further upheavals. Turkish and U.S. cooperation in limiting the spread of the negative effects of regional upheavals is expected to bring the two allies closer in the near future, especially following Clinton's forthcoming visit to Ankara. /Hurriyet/

Progress Made in Cyprus Peace Talks, UN Chief Says

Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders have agreed to ramp up negotiations to end the conflict on their divided island, but the process remains "very sensitive," the head of the United Nations said Wednesday. Speaking after four hours of talks, which he described as "spirited and substantive," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said Cypriot leader Demetris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Dervis Eroglu would hold more talks in the coming weeks. "I have pledged to make myself available to them again soon to continue to take stock of progress and to encourage the parties in further narrowing the differences," he stated. "There has been progress since we last met in November. Based on discussions today, it is clear that the two leaders worked to move closer together through a range of bridging proposals... Nonetheless, more work must be done to reach further convergences on the outstanding core issues."

Cyprus has been split since 1974, and the United Nations guards the island's 180-km (110-mile) ceasefire line. The two sides have made little headway in talks since 2008 to resolve the conflict that is blocking Turkey's bid to join the EU and causing strains between Greece and Turkey. Sources close to the negotiations say Ban has been pressing the rival leaders to resolve their major outstanding issues by March, ahead of Turkish and Greek Cypriot parliamentary polls. In a report to the Security Council in November, Ban said he would review the UN presence on the Mediterranean island and make recommendations based on developments in the negotiations, which have been largely stalled since 2008. Among the most contentious elements of the talks is how to reconcile property rights and claims among those uprooted by the conflict. More than a fifth of Cyprus' population of around 1 million people are internally displaced. /Sabah/

U.S. Calls Turkey's Gaza Flotilla Report "Credible"

Philip Crowley, a spokesman for the US State Department, on Wednesday described a report released by Turkey on Israel's deadly raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla as "independent and credible." "Both [Turkey and Israel] are doing what they can to help contribute to a fuller understanding of what happened during this incident last year [...]. I'm saying that Turkey - it is an independent, credible report. I'm not challenging either one," Crowley told reporters at a daily press briefing. The spokesman last Monday said an Israeli report on the flotilla incident was "transparent and independent."

Crowley explained that the Turkish National Commission of Inquiry last September submitted its interim report to the UN Secretary General's panel of inquiry, adding that both Turkey and Israel had worked "seriously and responsibly to get at the facts, and both have made important contributions to the work of the Secretary General's panel... We look forward to the process continuing at the United Nations within the Secretary General's Panel of Inquiry, which will give the international community the opportunity to

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fully review the circumstances surrounding this incident. And we look forward to a full examination of facts and perspectives from all sides," he said.

Crowley said relations with both Turkey and Israel were of "equal importance" to the US, adding, "they are both close friends of the United States. They have a relationship that has been important bilaterally and to the region, and we hope that both countries will continue to seek opportunities to move beyond the recent strains in their own bilateral relations." Crowley said the US recognized the importance the relationship between Turkey and Israel, adding that both countries exerted efforts to find ways to resolve the dispute. "We hope that can be done, because this relationship has very significant meaning, both in terms of our respective relations with these two countries, but more importantly, Turkey has been a significant player in helping to resolve issues in the region related to the pursuit of Middle East peace. And we would hope that in the future that effort can continue," he stated.

"Given the incident and the circumstances, I don't think that we're surprised that there are differing views of what transpired. That is expressly why we support the UN panel so that we can take the Turkish perspective, and it has a valid perspective; we can take the Israeli perspective, it has a valid perspective; and together, try to fully understand what happened. So - but just to reinforce that through the UN panel there's still work to be done and there's still, obviously, an effort that will be important to understand fully what happened last year," Crowley said. /Today's Zaman/

Erdoğan Visits Ukraine to Foster Strategic Ties

In an effort to boost ties, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan traveled to Ukraine last week for a two-day official visit, meeting with Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in Kiev. After their gathering and talks between the Turkish and Ukrainian delegations, the two officials attended the signing ceremony of an agreement on establishing a high-level strategic cooperation council between the two Black Sea countries.

Speaking at a joint press conference, Erdogan said that Turkey and Ukraine, in an effort to improve their economic and commercial ties, desired to implement free trade and visa exemption agreements as soon as possible. To that end, necessary orders had been given to intensify the negotiations, he noted. Stating that he held a fruitful meeting with Yanukovich, Erdogan declared they had agreed to turn the existing friendly and cooperative ties between their countries into a strategic partnership. He explained that the agreement signed Wednesday on the establishment of a high-level strategic council between Turkey and Ukraine would serve this goal.

Pointing to the trade volume between the two countries, the prime minister said that both countries had the power and potential to increase their 5 billion USD trade volume to 20 billion USD in the next 5 years and to 40 billion USD in the next 10 years. "We are two important countries of Europe and the Black Sea region," Erdogan highlighted. For his part, Yanukovich said the high-level strategic council between Turkey and Ukraine would be an important coordination mechanism for the bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Yanukovich also noted that Turkey and Ukraine mainly desired to

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cooperate on issues related to energy, transportation, the defense industry, and visa exemption. /Anadolu Ajansi/

Yıldız Announces Turkish Cooperation with Venezuela on Energy, Discusses Iran Sanctions

Speaking after a visit to Venezuela last week, Energy Minister Taner Yıldız said Turkey is planning an oil deal with Venezuela in return for housing projects in the Latin American country. Turkey is considering greater involvement in Venezuela's energy sector as part of its quest for cheaper oil imports, he explained. "Venezuela offered Turkey two oil fields in return for its cooperation in a series of construction projects. They are also positive about selling oil products to Turkey," Yıldız told reporters. He said Turkey could possibly invest up to \$2.4 billion in Venezuela in exchange for its oil products. While Turkey would undertake transportation of the products, Venezuela has said it wants to build a series of depots in Turkey capable of accommodating up to 4 million barrels of oil, Yıldız stated. A technical delegation is set to visit Venezuela next month to discuss the details of the construction projects, set to be carried out by Turkey's Housing Development Administration (TOKI). Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez also wants to visit Turkey, Yıldız noted.

Yıldız also stated that UN sanctions have not affected Turkey's oil and gas cooperation agreements with Iran, adding that UN decisions are binding on all members, including Turkey, but unilateral U.S. sanctions on Iran are not. "Of course we can find solutions through mutual discussion of those sanctions," he said. "Turkey can't be indifferent to Iran's resources. We buy natural gas from five countries, one of them is Iran." Turkey annulled the three-phase South Pars gas field project with Iran due to feasibility problems, Yıldız said, adding that a production-sharing natural gas contract with Iran is technically impossible, since the Iranian Constitution restricts such agreements. But Turkey wants to cooperate with Iran in other natural gas and oil projects through the private sector, he said. "Iran has offered 4 to 5 fields," he added. "We will call on Turkey's private sector to invest in them, which will require an investment of approximately \$400-\$500 million."

In addition, while Turkey has been discussing building a nuclear power plant exclusively with Japan, France had also approached Turkey with an offer but negotiations had not yet begun, Yıldız reported. However, any such discussion with France would include political considerations, he said, adding, "When considering such an offer, it is impossible to ignore France's resistance to Turkey's joining the European Union." Turkey could expect concessions on its EU bid if it were to go ahead with such a project with France, he said, calling it "our right." /Turkish Press Review/

Turkish FM Says EU Readmission Deal Set to be Finalized

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu confirmed Friday that talks over a readmission agreement, which have been a major stumbling block regarding visa agreements between Turkey and the European Union, were about to be finalized. "We have reached the final stage in the issue of the readmission agreement," Davutoğlu told a news conference, hailing it as a positive development. "We believe that there is no obstacle left before the visa exemption between Turkey and the EU." Davutoğlu said the EU had

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issued a statement on the issue after he had a detailed telephone conversation with Cecilia Malmstrom, a member of the European Commission responsible for internal affairs.

On Thursday, Malmstrom announced that following a meeting between chief negotiators held on January 14, 2011, in Ankara, final adjustments to the draft EU Readmission Agreement with Turkey were agreed. "The outcome of the negotiation is very balanced and will contribute greatly to the effective management of irregular migration in the region," Malmstrom stated, adding that she thanked the Turkish side for its constructive and pragmatic approach during negotiations.

"The text was presented to the EU Member States and I trust that they will approve the current compromise and that we will be able to bring it for formal conclusion to the next Justice and Home Affairs Council on February 24, 2011. The European Parliament will be duly involved, in line with the Treaty requirements," she said. "This important development also opens up new perspectives to further foster our cooperation with Turkey in the area of visa policy and related areas, with a view to improving the mobility of our citizens." /Hurriyet/

Turkey Marks Holocaust Remembrance Day

Turkey officially commemorated International Holocaust Remembrance Day Thursday for the first time at Istanbul's biggest synagogue, Neve Salom. International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the first global commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust, was first observed in 2006. "It is humanity's obligation to condemn the Holocaust, which aimed to completely destroy a people, to take measures to prevent future genocides, and to encourage efforts to educate new generations," said a statement yesterday from the office of Turkey's chief rabbi, on behalf of the Turkish-Jewish community. It added that every country worldwide has a duty to eliminate all types of racism and discrimination. The statement also cited how in 2005 President Abdullah Gul attended a ceremony in Auschwitz to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the death camp and has issued statements marking Holocaust Remembrance Day every year since.

Foreign Ministry officials attended the ceremonies, which opened with an exhibit marking the day before the ceremonies, followed by the screening of a documentary. The opening speech was delivered by Suzet Sidi, a Turkish-Jewish expert on the Holocaust. Chief Rabbi Rav Ishak Haleva and Istanbul Governor Avni Mutlu then lit candles in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, and Turkish-Jewish community leader Sami Herman also addressed the audience. /Turkish Press Review/

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