

May 2010

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Constitutional Package Passes in Parliament, Eyes Turn to President and CHP

With the passing of a package of constitutional amendments in Parliament late Thursday, all eyes have turned to the president and the main opposition party as Turkey anticipates a potential referendum on the reforms.

The package, which deputies approved with a 336-72 vote, was sent to President Abdullah Gül on Friday for his approval. He said he would make the necessary evaluations and not delay his decision. The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) however, is trying to secure the 110 votes needed to ask the Constitutional Court to annul the amendments.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said the referendum results would be a turning point for Turkey and congratulated deputies in his Justice and Development Party (AKP) for writing their names into history.

"Those in the opposition and the media who attacked our party couldn't hide their admiration for the solidarity of the AKP deputies. Now [the package] will be in the hands of its real owners," Erdoğan said, calling on his deputies to effectively explain the reform package to the public.

Following 14 days of discussions and the second round of voting on each of its articles, the package was voted on late Thursday with the participation of 409 deputies. Article 27, which anticipates that the amendments will be voted as a whole package in the referendum, passed Parliament with 336 votes during the second round.

On Monday, an amendment making political party closures more difficult was rejected by the Parliament, striking a first blow against the ruling party during the second day of second round debates on a constitutional reform package.

Article 8 of the comprehensive package received 327 votes, three less than required and was automatically dropped from the proposed amendments. Prime Minister Erdoğan convened his top aides for an urgent meeting immediately following the vote. Conveying an initial reaction, he said, "Deputies used their free will. We will continue on our path with the same determination."

President Gül has 15 days to approve the package or return it to Parliament. If he approves the reforms, the decision will be published in the Official Gazette and the

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referendum process will start. The president is obliged to take the package to a referendum as a whole in line with the Constitution since it passed with between 330 and 367 votes in Parliament. The referendum is likely to take place in July.

The CHP plans to apply to the Constitutional Court for the annulment of the package, claiming that its judiciary-related articles increase the government's power over the judiciary. The CHP has the right to apply to the top court if it can get at least 110 votes within 10 days after the amendments are published in the Official Gazette. /Hurriyet/

Turkey, Ukraine Sign Action Plan for Fostering Ties

On the occasion of an official visit to Kiev by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ukraine and Turkey have signed two landmark deals promising intense and strategic bilateral relations between the two countries in various fields.

Davutoğlu and his Ukrainian counterpart, Kostiantyn Hryshchenko, signed the "2010-2011 Action Plan" aimed at developing bilateral relations and initialed the "High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council Joint Declaration" on Wednesday. In the recent past, Turkey has established high-level strategic cooperation councils with neighboring Iraq and Syria. It is preparing to establish similar mechanisms with Bulgaria, Greece and Russia as well.

Speaking at a joint press conference following talks with Hryshchenko, Davutoğlu described Ukraine as "a very close neighbor" and "a strategic partner" regarding international relations. Noting that the relations are currently perfect, Davutoğlu added they have also decided to hold closer consultations between the foreign ministries of the two countries.

Turkey and Ukraine have a joint vision concerning regional issues, particularly regarding the Black Sea, he said, voicing Turkey's readiness to engage in economic integration and maximum cooperation with Ukraine. For his part, Hryshchenko said they have decided to raise the current relations to a higher level. Referring to the initialed joint declaration, he said the council would help determine the direction of the strategic relations, while also providing coordination for major projects in the fields of politics and the economy.

Also on Wednesday, Davutoğlu met with both Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and Prime Minister Mykola Azarov. During his meeting with Davutoğlu, Yanukovich voiced his willingness to host Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as an official guest in Kiev. Yanukovich also lent support to the preparations to establish a high-level strategic cooperation council between Ankara and Kiev.

Azarov, during talks with Davutoğlu, meanwhile, underlined that both countries have great potential for cooperation in investment, the transportation sphere, space and the construction and energy sectors, among others. "Ukraine and Turkey are promising partners in the energy sphere. We are ready to start a dialog in this direction," Azarov was quoted as saying by English-language online daily Kyiv Post.

Wrapping up his talks in Kiev after a meeting with Vladimir Litvin, the speaker of the Supreme Rada (parliament) of Ukraine, on Thursday, Davutoğlu proceeded to the Autonomous Republic of Crimea before departing for Turkey.

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Meanwhile in Brussels, Turkish Chief of General Staff Gen. İlker Basbuğ, Ukrainian Chief of Defense Gen. Ivan Svyda and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe Adm. James Stavridis signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on "Air Situation Data Exchange" (ASDE). The agreement, which aims to reduce airspace conflicts in two ways - by minimizing potential cross-border incidents and optimizing responses to renegade situations with civil airplanes -- was signed on the sidelines of the spring meeting of the NATO Military Committee. /Today's Zaman/

UN Official Proposes May 26 for Resumption of Cyprus Talks

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Adviser on Cyprus Alexander Downer said Monday he proposed to the new President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) Dervis Eroğlu that negotiations in Cyprus might resume on May 26, 2010.

Speaking to reporters following his meeting with Downer in Lefkosa President Eroğlu said that the negotiations in Cyprus would most likely resume on May 26. "We have had a good conversation with Downer and talked on various issues. We have told Alexander Downer that we wanted to conclude negotiations in a certain time period and hold a referendum," Eroğlu said.

"Downer shares our ideas and thoughts. The United Nations shares the same notion with Turkish Cypriots that negotiations cannot go on forever," Eroğlu noted.

"We insist on the resumption of negotiations and continuation of the negotiations and want to end negotiations with an agreement that would be supported by the two communities in Cyprus," Eroğlu said.

"During our talks with Downer today, we expressed our thoughts on the isolation of the TRNC," Eroğlu said. In response to a question, Eroğlu said that he would travel to Ankara to meet with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan before Erdogan visits Athens later in May. /Today's Zaman/

Turkey Discusses Iran with Syria and Qatar

Syria and Qatar back Turkish efforts for a diplomatic solution to the row over Iran's nuclear program, Turkey's foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said after leaders of the three countries met Sunday, a report said. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, held three-way talks in Istanbul to discuss regional affairs.

Davutoğlu said the Syrian and Qatari leaders both supported Ankara's efforts to mediate between Western powers and Iran, among them a proposal to host talks over Tehran's nuclear activities, Anatolia news agency reported.

"The three countries condemned recent rhetoric and actions raising tensions in the region... They emphasized support for all efforts aimed at regional peace and stability," the minister was quoted as saying.

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Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani was also in Turkey Sunday, holding talks with President Abdullah Gül in Istanbul at the start of a three-day visit, but no statement was made after the meeting.

Turkey and Brazil, both non-permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, are opposed to fresh sanctions against Iran, sought by the United States, and have recently stepped up diplomatic efforts to resolve the standoff.

Davutoğlu said Friday he had proposed to host talks between top Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, as a representative of world powers in the so-called P5+1 group, to break the standoff over Iran's nuclear program. Iran has welcomed the idea and a reply is awaited from Ashton, he said.
/Hurriyet/

Erdogan to Pay Wide-Ranging International Visits this Month and Next

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will pay a visit to Greece Friday May 14 and Saturday May 15 to attend a meeting of the Turkish-Greek High-Level Cooperation Council. Afterwards, Erdogan will visit Azerbaijan and Georgia on May 17. The main topic of the former visit will be Azeri-Armenian relations. Erdogan will then pay a visit to Spain on May 22 to meet with his Spanish counterpart Jose Manuel Zapatero and attend a meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations. On May 28-30, Erdogan will pay visits to Brazil, Argentina and Chile. On June 26-27, he will visit Canada to attend a G-20 meeting and then proceed to Cuba to reportedly meet with Fidel Castro, the ailing former Cuban leader's health allowing. /Turkish Press Review/

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Iran Inks Deal to Send Low Enriched Uranium to Turkey

Iran inked a nuclear-fuel swap deal Monday that commits it to ship 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium to Turkey, potentially ending a standoff with world powers gearing up for new sanctions against the Islamic republic. The agreement, under which Iran will in return receive nuclear fuel for a Tehran reactor, was signed in the Iranian capital between the foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey and Brazil, an Agence France-Presse correspondent said.

The signing came after three-way talks by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Under the agreement, Iran will deposit 1,200 kilograms of its low-enriched uranium (LEU) in Turkey.

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"While in Turkey this LEU will continue to be the property of Iran. Iran and the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] may station observers to monitor the safekeeping of the LEU in Turkey," the accord reads. "Iran will notify the IAEA in writing through official channels of its agreement with the above within seven days following the date of this declaration," it adds.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast told reporters that it would then be up to the IAEA to inform "the Vienna group" - the United States, France and Russia - of the proposal. The three powers have been at the forefront of efforts to persuade Iran to accept a U.N.-backed deal brokered last October, under which Iran was required to ship its LEU to Russia to be further enriched and then on to France to make nuclear fuel for the Tehran research reactor.

Iran had so far stalled on the deal, insisting it wants to keep the LEU on its own soil for a simultaneous swap with reactor fuel. Its refusal to sign on the IAEA accord prompted major powers led by the United States to threaten a fourth round of U.N. sanctions against the Islamic republic for failing to halt its uranium enrichment activities.

Should the Vienna group accept the deal, the accord says, Iran would deliver 1,200 kilograms of LEU to Turkey within a month and would expect to receive from the world powers 120 kilos of fuel for Tehran's research reactor within a year. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu told reporters after Monday's signing that Ankara now sees "no need" for further U.N. sanctions against Iran. "This agreement should be regarded positively and there is no need for sanctions now that we [Turkey and Brazil] have made guarantees and the low-enriched uranium will remain in Turkey," he explained.

There was no immediate reaction from the IAEA. Brazil's president, in Iran for a summit of non-aligned countries, held talks on the nuclear issue with Iran's leadership Sunday. At Iran's invitation, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan arrived at around midnight local time Sunday to join Lula.

Turkey and Brazil are both currently non-permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. Both have so far resisted U.S.-led efforts to push through a fourth package of sanctions over Iran's failure to heed repeated ultimatums to suspend its sensitive uranium enrichment activities. /Hurriyet/

Greece and Turkey Mark a Fresh Start Aimed at Eventual Partnership

The leaders of longtime foes Greece and Turkey have billed the latter's landmark visit to Athens, during which they held a historic joint cabinet meeting and signed more than two dozen agreements, as the beginning of a historic new cooperation.

"I am optimistic that the groundbreaking and courageous step we are taking today can bring results, precisely because the will exists," Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou said late on Friday during a joint news conference with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was on his first trip to Greece since 2004.

Earlier, Erdoğan and Papandreou, who was instrumental in easing Greek-Turkish hostility during his 1999-2004 tenure as foreign minister, chaired a first-ever joint Cabinet

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meeting, dubbed the high level cooperation council -- launching a series of annual meetings that will alternate between the two countries.

The ministers signed 22 agreements, on issues from energy cooperation, protecting forests and combating illegal immigration, to promoting Greece and Turkey as joint destinations for Chinese tourists and advancing a gas pipeline dubbed ITGI that links Turkey, Greece and Italy.

"The number and the depth of the agreements that we just signed is an indication, if not proof, of the historic nature of this visit," Papandreou said. Erdoğan said he was optimistic Turkey would reopen a Greek Orthodox seminary, meeting a key demand by the European Union to strengthen Ankara's bid for membership in the bloc. The Halki Theological School on Heybeliada Island, near İstanbul, was closed to new students in 1971 under a law that put religious and military training under state control. The school closed its doors in 1985, when the last five students graduated.

But Erdoğan also urged Greece to enhance freedoms for its Muslim minority in Thrace and restore a crumbling mosque in Athens currently used to store archaeological finds. Turkey's 380-strong delegation in Athens on Friday included 10 Cabinet ministers and about 100 businessmen.

Erdoğan said he wanted to see bilateral trade increase to \$6.25 billion. Last year, trade between the two countries stood at \$2.6 billion, down from \$3.4 billion in 2008. Debt-ridden Greece, faced with the specter of bankruptcy, needs trade and investment. Athens recently secured \$138 billion in rescue loans from European countries and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) -- after pledging deep-cutting austerity measures.

Greece is the EU's largest military spender in proportion to its annual output, due to an arms race with its eastern neighbor. Erdoğan said that should change, explaining, "Both countries have very large defense budgets... We must reduce these expenditures and use the money for other purposes." /Today's Zaman/

Turkish-Russian Ties Evolve into Strategic Partnership

Turkey and Russia agreed to create an intergovernmental council and signed a series of agreements -- including one on mutually lifting visa requirements -- to bolster cooperation between the former Cold War rivals Wednesday, prompting visiting Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to brand the relations between the two countries a "strategic partnership."

"Russia and Turkey are strategic partners, not only in words but genuinely," Medvedev said during a joint press conference with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during his first official visit to Ankara. His remarks were simultaneously translated into Turkish. Earlier in the day, during a press conference with President Abdullah Gül, he said relations have progressed to a "new phase" and were "multidimensional" and had a strategic dimension.

The two countries agreed Wednesday to launch a high-level cooperation council, an intergovernmental body that is to be led by Medvedev and Erdoğan and will meet

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annually to review ties. Turkey, which has been seeking an active role in its region, has established similar mechanisms with Syria, Iraq and Greece.

The two sides also agreed to lift the visa requirement for their nationals for trips not exceeding 30 days, a measure that is expected to please Russians who flock to Turkey's southern holiday resorts every year. Some 3 million Russian visitors come to Turkey, mostly to Antalya, annually, and the visa exemption is expected to further increase the number. The visa liberalization, however, will only become effective following the signing of an agreement that authorities say is designed to prevent the abuse of visa-free travel.

Initial assessments show the Turkish national budget will be an immediate loser. It is expected to lose revenue from the visa fees collected from Russian nationals, which stands at about TL 80 million annually.

Among other highlights of the visit is an agreement that will allow Russian companies to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant in the southern province of Mersin. A previous tender won by a Russian consortium was cancelled by a Turkish court. The construction of the nuclear power plant is expected to take seven years, Prime Minister Erdoğan said.

Medvedev and Turkish leaders also voiced readiness to boost the bilateral trade volume, currently standing at about \$40 billion, to \$100 billion in the next five years. Medvedev said the goal is attainable. "It is hard even to imagine, but this figure is an attainable one," he said. "Once we will achieve this goal, we will be a model for Europe."

Most of the trade volume stems from Turkish energy imports from Russia. Turkey, dependent on Russia for 70 percent of its energy imports, is trying to balance the imports with cooperation in a number of energy projects. Medvedev said they also agreed to work on the proposed Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline that would pump Russian oil from Turkey's Black Sea coast to the Mediterranean. It will run from the Black Sea port of Samsun to the Ceyhan oil terminal in the Mediterranean, where an oil refinery will be set up. Discussions are also under way on cooperation regarding the Moscow-backed, Europe-bound South Stream gas pipeline. /Today's Zaman/

Turkish Constitutional Referendum Set for September 12

Turkey's election board announced Thursday that Turkey will hold a referendum on Sept. 12, putting the government-sponsored constitutional reform package to a national vote. After a meeting Thursday, Kirdar Özsoylu, acting president of the Supreme Election Board (YSK) said legal arrangements concerning referendums are subject to the Election Law and that the referendum would be held within 120 days on Sept. 12. Sept. 12 is a symbolic date in Turkey as it associated with the Sept. 12, 1980, military coup.

Following President Abdullah Gül's approval of the government-sponsored constitutional changes Wednesday, the referendum process officially began with the publication of the decision in the Official Gazette on Thursday.

With the publication of the decision in the Official Gazette, the YSK convened Thursday to determine the possible referendum schedule, which also ended the ongoing dispute between the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) over the referendum date for the amendments.

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The YSK's decision will be valid if the top court does not annul the reform package, as the CHP announced Thursday it would apply to the highest court for the annulment of the changes on Friday at 11 a.m. /Hurriyet/

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Turkey in Bid to Rally Support for Iran Nuke Deal

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has phoned world leaders to seek support for a deal Iran agreed to earlier this week to ease tensions over its nuclear program as a US-led coalition pushes for sanctions against Tehran to force it to stop enriching uranium. Erdogan spoke to several world leaders, including US President Barack Obama and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Erdogan, speaking at a joint press conference with Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaci in Ankara, said he was also seeking support from neighboring countries, a move that appears to be aimed at broadening the base of international support for the deal. Erdogan spoke to Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou.

"I would be happy if we can make the slightest contribution to the world peace," Erdogan said, urging the West to heed the conciliatory step taken by Iran. Brazil and Turkey brokered a surprise deal on Monday, in which Iran agreed to send its high-enriched uranium to Turkey in return for fuel rods for a medical research reactor. Turkey, Brazil and Iran have urged a halt to talk of further sanctions because of the deal, but critics in the West insist the deal was only a tactic to avert or delay sanctions.

Despite the deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil, the US proposed a draft sanctions resolution, agreed to by all five permanent UN Security Council members after months of negotiation, to the UN Security Council on Tuesday. Erdogan said Obama was focused on the content of the letter Iran would send to the IAEA in their telephone conversation. "He said the US was attaching big importance to this," Erdogan explained.

"The president stressed the international community's continuing and fundamental concerns about Iran's overall nuclear program," the White House said in a statement summarizing Obama's telephone conversation with Erdogan. Obama told Erdogan that the international community is waiting for "formal and authoritative message" from Iran to IAEA, according to the statement. Russia also urged Iran to send the proposal to the IAEA as soon as possible.

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"We call on Iran to send its proposal to the IAEA as quickly as possible so that the scheme for the fuel exchange can be agreed," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said during a visit to Italy. Meanwhile, Iran announced that it could cancel its agreement with Turkey and Brazil to transfer some of its uranium abroad if the UN Security Council approves the sanctions. /Turkish Press Review/

Kemal Kilicdaroglu Elected Head of Republican People's Party

As the single candidate for the leadership at Saturday's historic party convention, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was elected as the Republican People's Party's (CHP's) seventh chief with 1,189 votes out of the 1,246 delegates who were present.

"I now have a very important seat inherited from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, İsmet İnönü, Bülent Ecevit and Deniz Baykal," Kılıçdaroğlu said in his first remarks after his election was announced. "And I am aware of the responsibility of this seat." Kılıçdaroğlu addressed the convention for more than an hour before the voting at Atatürk Sports Hall, where the ambition displayed by the crowd for "power" was also felt in the speech by the presumptive new leader.

Though he has a reputation for being calm, Kılıçdaroğlu turned his guns on Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and leveled harsh criticism against the Turkish leader's policies in his speech. Through the convention, the CHP had launched a "run" instead of a "march" to make Turkey a more democratic and modern country, he said.

At the core of Kılıçdaroğlu's speech were social policies, poverty and unemployment, a shift from the continuity of the secular and republican regime emphasized by former leader Baykal, who was often criticized for ignoring the economic and social problems in Turkey. Former CHP leader Deniz Baykal was absent in the hall during his party's convention, instead sending a congratulatory message to Kılıçdaroğlu after he was elected. /Hurriyet/

Erdoğan's Baku Visit Reaffirms Turkish-Azerbaijani Partnership

Turkey and Azerbaijan have decided to establish a high-level strategic cooperation council to further develop relations between the two countries. Speaking at a joint press conference with Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev on Monday, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said fruitful talks had been held during his visit to the Azerbaijani capital of Baku. Pointing to Aliyev's upcoming visit to Turkey in June, Erdoğan said officials from the two countries would continue to pay visits and hold talks on political, military, commercial, economic and cultural issues.

Commenting on the content of his meeting with Aliyev, Erdoğan said one of the most important steps they took during Monday's gathering was the decision to establish a high-level strategic cooperation council between their countries. Erdoğan said the establishment of such a council would contribute to the future of relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Noting that Aliyev had also informed him about the Nagorno-Karabakh issue during their talks, Erdoğan said Azerbaijan had always maintained its positive stance on the matter.

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"Azerbaijan has reacted positively to the Minsk Group's latest proposal, although Armenia has not replied to it yet. This shows Azerbaijan's positive stance on the matter," the Turkish prime minister said. Highlighting that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue had been discussed during Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's recent visit to Turkey as well, Erdoğan said Turkey would maintain its sensitivity regarding the matter.

Erdoğan said his nation will not ratify a deal to normalize ties with Armenia until the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute is settled. Neither Turkey nor Armenia's parliament has ratified the October agreement to restore diplomatic ties and reopen their shared border. As part of his program in Baku, Erdoğan unveiled a statue of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in Baku with Aliyev following their meeting.

Speaking during the unveiling ceremony, Erdoğan thanked Aliyev for the monument, saying it was very meaningful that President Aliyev chose a location close to the Turkish Embassy in Baku for the statue. "With every passing day, our political, military, economic, cultural and commercial relations are developing. From now on, there will be growth in Azerbaijan and growth in Turkey. The status of these two countries in the global community will be transformed," Erdoğan said.

Turkish State Minister Mehmet Aydın, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Energy and Natural Resources Minister Taner Yıldız accompanied Prime Minister Erdoğan during his visit to Baku.

Erdoğan also said Turkish-Azerbaijani relations are getting stronger with each passing day and that no one should doubt this relationship. No one should pay attention to gossip, he said, adding that the level of unity and brotherhood between the two countries cannot be determined by hearsay. /Today's Zaman/

Turkish-Georgian Relations Exemplary, Saakashvili Says

The Georgian president said relations between Turkey and Georgia are "exemplary" during a visit by the Turkish prime minister to the Black Sea resort city of Batumi on Monday.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's remarks came while he was speaking during the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the Sheraton Batumi Hotel, built by Turkish businessmen, with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. "I have had very good relations with many leaders; Georgia has very close cooperation with many countries, but Turkey's exemplary cooperation with Georgia is an example for the whole of Europe and for the entire region," Saakashvili said, as reported by the Georgian media.

Speaking during the opening ceremony, Erdoğan said the hotel is a shining white star for Batumi and the city is one of the most beautiful places in the Black Sea region. Expressing his thanks to businessman Nurettin Çarmıklı and Nuron Holding for designing such a wonderful hotel, Erdoğan said the hotel's architectural design was a very important project. He added that tourism is significant for the Turkish economy and that during his party's seven years in power, they had paid great attention to tourism.

Saakashvili also spoke about Iran's recently signed agreement on its nuclear program.

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He said he has not seen such a prompt resolution of issues or such effective intergovernmental cooperation as they had with Turkey and that this was thanks to Erdoğan. Saakashvili went on to say that the Turkish government sets an example in that no matter what the global crisis, if the government and people are strong, it is always possible to improve the situation.

Saakashvili said the agreement with Iran, mediated by Brazil and Turkey, was "a diplomatic victory." Later during the ceremony, Saakashvili awarded Erdoğan with the Order of the Golden Fleece for his contribution to the development of bilateral relations. /Today's Zaman/

Greece Rejects Turkish Warplane Disarmament Proposal

Greece rejected Saturday a Turkish proposal to disarm their warplanes that patrol the Aegean Sea, spurning the latest initiative to reduce tensions between the heavily armed neighbors.

"Greek warplanes are armed because they are scrambled to face an unknown threat, because the Turkish side does not file flight plans to enter the Athens Flight Information Region," Deputy Greek Foreign Minister Dimitris Droutsas said in an interview published in the Greek newspaper Imerissia.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made the warplanes proposal during a May 14-15 visit to Athens, during which he raised hopes that further improvements in their relations would eventually lead to arms reductions.

Regional rivals for centuries despite being members of NATO for the past five decades, Greece and Turkey came to the brink of war as recently as 1996 and are still mired in dispute over the ethnically divided island of Cyprus.

Turkey questions Greek claims to the waters and airspace surrounding many islands near the Turkish coast.

Greek warplanes are routinely sent to intercept Turkish fighter aircraft whenever they enter these zones, leading to the occasional mock dogfight, which in 2006 claimed the life of a Greek pilot in a mid-air collision.

While characterizing Erdoğan's visit as "important," Droutsas said that "the disarmament of warplanes does not mean a reduction of tensions and the risk of an accident. What must disappear is the threat." /Hurriyet/

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