



Washington

Selected News on Turkey

April 2010

March 29 - April 4, 2010

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Turkey, Germany Seek Strategic Partnership Despite Hurdles

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Turkey began Monday amid high tension over her stances on Turkish high schools in Germany and Turkey's entry into the EU. But the two countries are seeking a "strategic partnership" despite the existing hurdles, the German leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said in a joint press conference after their meeting.

"We discussed the ways to develop our friendly relations and to boost bilateral cooperation," Erdoğan said, describing the talks as "positive and fruitful."

In the wake of her controversial remarks rejecting the idea of opening Turkish high schools in Germany and insisting on a "privileged partnership" for Turkey instead of full membership in the EU, Merkel presented Erdoğan with a "white peace pigeon" made by Lara, a 9-year-old German student of Turkish origin, at the beginning of the two leaders' meeting.

Following the talks, both Merkel and Erdoğan made positive remarks, with some reservations, about developing bilateral cooperation in various fields.

The Turkish community in Germany was one of the issues on the agenda, Erdoğan said, explaining, "Our citizens living in Germany need to integrate with society but also preserve their own culture. We agreed that both sides have responsibility on this issue." Signaling a potential agreement for opening Turkish high schools in the European country, Erdoğan added that he was "glad to hear that constructive steps will be taken and Turkish schools may similarly be opened in Germany."

Chancellor Merkel confirmed that the two leaders share a "common goal to develop special relations between Germany and Turkey" and said her previous remarks about Turkish high schools were misunderstood. "What we assert is that it is impossible to survive in Germany without German language skills," Merkel said. "We don't mean assimilation, but a full integration. Of course everyone has the right to preserve their own cultural roots, but we want them to join social life."

At the joint press conference, Erdoğan once more underscored that Turkey's final aim is full membership in the EU, not a "privileged partnership" of the kind that Merkel has suggested. For her part, the German leader said that the "Cyprus issue needs to be solved."

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Asked if the two leaders had agreed on new sanctions against Iran over its nuclear-enrichment program, Merkel replied, "There has been no progress for a long time and we will back sanctions unless Iran take a positive step in the near future." Merkel also noted the upcoming United Nations meetings, adding, "It will be clear in the future whether we agree on this topic. We've agreed to continue our consultations and later make a decision under the U.N. umbrella."

Erdoğan rebuffed the idea of new sanctions, calling for a diplomatic solution instead. "Iran is our neighbor and strategic partner, especially in the field of energy. You have to consider this," he said. The Turkish prime minister said two earlier rounds of sanctions had failed to result in a solution. "We don't think implementing sanctions is a way out in this region and suggest a diplomatic solution," he said.

A three-member delegation from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, or BDP, met with Merkel, asking to be "responsible for the Kurdish community in Germany." Merkel also advocated during her visit that German police conduct operations against terror-related crime and said all nongovernmental organizations should be free of links to terror organizations. /Hurriyet/

Turkish Government Submits Constitutional Reform Package to Parliament

Turkey's government on Tuesday asked Parliament to approve a series of amendments to the constitution, which could pave the way for a trial of top military commanders by a civilian court and make disbanding political parties more difficult.

The governing Justice and Development Party submitted a draft law including 29 amendments to the Parliament to reform the constitution, a legacy of a 1980 military coup, arguing that the changes would make it more democratic and strengthen the country's bid to join the EU.

"The proposal includes measures that increase standards of democracy, the law and protect individual rights while expanding the right of collective bargaining," Bekir Bozdağ, a senior member of the governing party, said after submitting the draft law.

However, opposition parties have criticized the government for trying to increase its political clout over the secular judiciary and to save its party, which narrowly escaped a ban by the Constitutional Court for allegedly undermining secularism in 2008.

A parliamentary vote could come as early as next week, but there is a strong possibility of a referendum on the amendments this summer since there is no consensus to comfortably pass them. The government, which has strong electoral backing, says the amendments will be voted as a whole in case of a referendum.

Devlet Bahçeli, head of the opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), said it would not support the amendments. "The constitution package is not designed according to needs of Turkey but special needs of the" governing party, Bahçeli told his lawmakers on Tuesday. "The government has dragged Turkey into a new conflict with this fait-accompli attempt." /Today's Zaman/

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Turkish Prime Minister Is Going to US, Sending Back Envoy

Turkey said on Friday that it was returning its ambassador to Washington, a month after he was recalled to protest a US congressional committee labeling as "genocide" the World War One killings of Anatolian Armenians.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan also confirmed that he would attend an international nuclear summit hosted by President Barack Obama in Washington on April 12-13.

The US House of Representatives committee had approved a non-binding resolution on March 4 calling on President Obama to refer to the killings of Armenians as "genocide," prompting Turkey to immediately withdraw its envoy.

Earlier in the week, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu held a telephone conversation with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to discuss the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process and the recent passage of the resolution. During the 40-minute conversation, Davutoglu relayed Turkey's hope that President Barack Obama will consider Turkey's sensitivities in his speech this year marking April 24 Armenian Remembrance Day. Turkey's ambassador to Sweden also returned to her post following a similar row. /Today's Zaman-Turkish Press Review/

Gul Calls for More Turkish-Pakistani Economic Cooperation

Turkey and Pakistan enjoy strong political relations and now it's time to boost bilateral economic cooperation, President Abdullah Gul revealed Thursday. Completing his official talks in the capital Islamabad, Gul proceeded to Lahore, Pakistan's cultural capital, to attend a meeting of the Turkish-Pakistani Business Forum. There Gul received a warm welcome with Pakistani people waving Turkish and Pakistani flags along the road where Gul's procession passed.

During the welcoming ceremony at Lahore airport, famous Turkish songs were performed by the Pakistani ceremonial band. "Our economic relations fall short of what we want, so we must forge economic cooperation in line with our excellent political relations," Gul told the meeting. Gul said cargo train service would begin between Istanbul and Islamabad, and that Turkish and Pakistani businessmen should become better acquainted.

Calling on businesspeople from both sides to make use of their countries' potential in energy, industry, manufacturing industry, agriculture, food and construction, Gul said Turkey is ready to share its experiences with Pakistan in dam and hydroelectric power plant construction and contracting services.

He urged Turkish and Pakistani entrepreneurs to establish partnerships, calling for more Turkish investments in Pakistan. Gul also said Turkey and Pakistan support each other on international platforms. After Gul's speech, officials from the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodities Exchanges (TOBB) and the Lahore industrial zone signed an agreement paving the way for Turkish investments in the area. In Pencap state, Gul also watched a polo game and a local equestrian sports show called Tent Pegging. Gul was also given an Arabic horse as a gift there. /Turkish Press Review/

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Sarkozy and Erdogan Agree to Disagree on EU Bid, Iran

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, a staunch opponent of Turkey's membership in the European Union, may pay his first visit to Ankara later this year. Sarkozy, invited to Turkey by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during a meeting in Paris on Wednesday, said he may visit after November. But the French leader refused to change his stance towards Turkey's EU membership.

Despite their disagreements, Sarkozy and Erdoğan said they were committed to improving bilateral ties between Turkey and France. The two sides also appeared to disagree on the issue of sanctions against Iran, but Sarkozy announced full backing for Turkey's fight against terrorism.

Erdoğan traveled to the French capital in a bid to boost diplomatic ties and enhance cooperation in the fields of economy, energy and transportation between the two countries. Ahead of his meeting with the French president, Erdoğan had expressed hope about the change in the position of France against Turkey's bid to become a full EU member.

"I am not giving way to despair. I think Sarkozy will reconsider his approach [toward Turkey's bid]," Erdoğan told reporters. "Turkey has fulfilled more Copenhagen and Maastricht criteria than some EU member countries," he added.

France is a strong opponent of Turkey's full membership in the union. The Turkish prime minister was accompanied by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Egemen Bağış, state minister and chief negotiator for EU talks, Culture and Tourism Minister Ertuğrul Günay and State Minister Zafer Çağlayan during his visit.

The French president welcomed Erdoğan at the Elysée Palace. The two had a meeting at the palace that lasted almost one hour. Davutoğlu and his French counterpart, Bernard Kouchner, along with Bağış and the French secretary of state for European affairs, Pierre Lellouche, were also present during the meeting.

Erdoğan and Sarkozy discussed bilateral ties between Turkey and France. Erdoğan later met with the CEOs of prominent French companies. The French Foreign Ministry announced that Erdoğan and Sarkozy met in order to boost economic ties between Turkey and France and to discuss new cooperative projects between the two countries in the fields of transportation, energy and infrastructure. /Today's Zaman/

Turkish, Armenian Leaders to Meet in Bid to Revive Peace Efforts

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Turkey and Armenia agreed Wednesday that their leaders would meet next week in a bid to revive stalled reconciliation efforts between the two long-estranged neighbors, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said.

The meeting between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Armenian President Serge Sarkisian - to take place on the sidelines of an April 12 to 13 nuclear-security summit in Washington, D.C. - was agreed to in talks held by a Turkish envoy in Yerevan, the ministry said in a statement.

During the talks, the sides "confirmed mutually their commitment to the [normalization] process and their understanding that, despite the difficulties, this window of opportunity should not be missed," the statement said.

Erdoğan sent Turkey's top diplomat to Yerevan to discuss steps to resolve the impasse on a fragile deal the two countries signed in October to end decades of hostility, establish diplomatic relations and open their border.

The Turkish envoy, Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioğlu, held talks with Sarkisian and his Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian, conveying a proposal that Erdoğan and Sarkisian meet in Washington, Armenia's presidency said. An Armenian official had earlier told the Agence France-Presse that Yerevan was considering the request.

"Sarkisian said [during the meeting] that Armenia expects Turkey to take practical steps to guarantee decisive progress in the process of normalizing relations, without preconditions," Sarkisian's office said in a statement.

Speaking to reporters during a visit to Paris, Erdoğan said he had sent a letter to the Armenian president through his envoy underscoring Ankara's commitment to see the accord to fruition. "We will always show our loyalty to the signatures that we put down [under the deal]. It is out of the question for us to take a step back unless there is an extraordinary situation," the Turkish prime minister said. "I hope [the reconciliation process] will end positively." /Hurriyet/

Ambassador Tan Returns to US after Row; Erdogan Set for Talks with Obama

Turkey's ambassador to the United States returned to Washington on Tuesday, a month after being recalled to Ankara in protest of a congressional committee vote to endorse Armenian claims of genocide at the hands of the late Ottoman Empire a century ago.

Speaking to reporters at Ankara's Esenboğa Airport before taking a flight to Washington, Ambassador Namık Tan said the government's decision to recall him was a political message, which he said was received by the US administration. Ankara in turn has received satisfactory responses from the US, paving the way for his return to Washington, Tan went on to say. "We have received the responses that satisfied us. It is time for me to return to my post," he told reporters.

Turkey decided to send back its ambassador to Washington last week after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had a one-hour talk with her Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoğlu, on the phone. Tan's return to Washington came a week before a key nuclear

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summit in Washington, which Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will also attend. "I will meet the prime minister in Washington at the weekend," Tan said. He hopes the positive atmosphere in Turkish-US ties will continue after the nuclear summit.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Energy and Natural Resources Minister Taner Yildiz will accompany Erdogan, who will attend various sessions and hold bilateral talks with attending leaders from such countries as Russia, China, Brazil, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Erdogan reversed his earlier decision not to attend the summit and is expected to meet with President Obama on the sidelines of the conference. Davutoglu and Clinton are also expected to meet. /Today's Zaman-Turkish Press Review/

Turkey, Greece Set for Better Relations

The leaders of Turkey and Greece will sign a strategic partnership agreement in May as part of mutual confidence-building measures, according to the two countries' foreign ministers. "[Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan will pay a visit to Athens in mid-May to his Greek counterpart, [George] Papandreou," Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said in a joint press conference held Thursday with Greek Deputy Foreign Minister Dimitris Droutsas.

"We hope that it will be a historic visit introducing a new vision to Turkish-Greek relations," Davutoğlu told reporters after hosting a delegation meeting in Ankara to finalize preparations.

Droutsas and Davutoğlu announced a number of confidence-building measures that will lead both neighbors to cut defense expenses and instead allocate funds toward education, social security and health care systems.

"This new vision is based not on a perception of mutual threat but an understanding of common interest ... When we succeed in building this common future together, defense requirements will mutually cease to exist," Davutoğlu said.

The measures include the exchange of military units for training, mutual visits and conferences for cadets and a joint organization of training programs for soldiers from countries that have partnership deals with NATO, according to a written statement issued after the talks. "These measures will help bring our countries, peoples and militaries closer," Droutsas explained.

The two sides will also intensify talks aimed at resolving disputes over territorial rights in the Aegean Sea, which have been progressing for years behind closed doors. Erdoğan and Papandreou earlier exchanged letters stressing the mutual desire to secure better ties. In 1999, Papandreou, then foreign minister, and his late Turkish counterpart, İsmail Cem, made a concerted effort at eliminating the problems causing tension between the two neighbors.

Greece, which is struggling to tackle its financial problems, wants to boost economic ties, especially in the field of tourism. In this scope, a joint-business forum will be held during Erdoğan's visit to Athens. "Visas are very important, especially in the tourism sector. Greece will take the initiative, urging the EU Commission to ease visa regulations toward Turkish citizens," Droutsas said.

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"The economic crisis is a sort of natural disaster. Having had similar experiences, we are ready to back our neighbor via effective and short-term measures. The joint-business forum and cooperation in the tourism sector is among them," Davutoğlu said.

Echoing a project that Spain and Portugal have already begun mutually, Greece and Turkey will soon form joint tourism projects as well, the minister said. /Hurriyet/

TUSIAD Highlights

On April 5 2010 at the Sabanci Center, TUSIAD awarded the Best Young Lawyer Prize to Mert Namlı of İstanbul University for his study on "The principle of controversial trial in Turkish and French law." TUSIAD Chairwoman Umit Boyner and TUSIAD Vice Chair Haluk Dincer both spoke at the ceremony.

On April 7, TUSIAD and REC Turkiye revealed the Turkish finalists for the European Business Awards for the Environment. Arcelik was awarded the 1st prize in the category of management, which focuses on contributions to sustainable development through a sound corporate governance.

Arcelik was again awarded with the 1st prize in the category of product. The award was given to Arcelik's new washer, which has the world's least energy and water consumption. Arcelik Cooling Equipment and Eczabasi Vitra were selected as finalists in this category.

EnerjiSa was awarded with the 1st prize in the process category, with an energy efficient process it has developed. The grand prizes for all of Europe will be awarded on June 2 in Brussels, Belgium.

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Armenia, Turkey Agree to Continue Reconciliatory Talks Despite Rifts

At a time when efforts to normalize their bilateral ties have been stalled for a number of reasons, the leaders of Armenia and Turkey agreed at a landmark meeting to continue these efforts despite visible difficulties ahead. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan held a rare bilateral meeting in Washington on Monday on the sidelines of a two-day nuclear security summit hosted by US President Barack Obama that started earlier on Monday at the Washington Convention Center.

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The two leaders had held another rare meeting in January 2009, when they both participated in an annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) held in the ski resort town of Davos, Switzerland. The main item on the agenda of the almost one-and-a-half-hour-long meeting was a detailed exchange of views on a letter recently sent by Erdoğan to Sarkysyan, well-informed sources said. The letter was sent via Feridun Sinirlioğlu, the Foreign Ministry undersecretary, who last week paid successive visits first to Yerevan and then to Baku as Erdoğan's special envoy.

It contained a message that an agreement would better serve the interests of the two countries, especially when compared to the cost of the failure to achieve peace. In addition to Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian and his Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Armenian Presidential Administration Deputy Chief of Staff Vigen Sargsyan and Sinirlioğlu attended the meeting.

The Armenian and Turkish sides agreed to continue efforts to normalize their relations via contacts led by the foreign ministers of the two countries, the same well-informed sources said. Despite the absence of a joint statement following their meeting, Armenian and Turkish leaders, in remarks delivered separately following the meeting, reiterated their well-known positions.

Speaking at George Mason University's new Center for Global Islamic Studies in Fairfax, Virginia, Erdoğan criticized a long-running effort in the US Congress to pass a resolution declaring that Anatolian Armenians were victims of genocide nearly a century ago. "We are against a one-sided interpretation of history," Erdoğan said. "History cannot be written in parliament and judged by parliament."

The venue for Sarkysyan's remarks was Washington National Cathedral. "This morning I met with the prime minister of Turkey. Our position has been and remains very straightforward. Turkey cannot speak with Armenia and the Armenian people in the language of conditions. We will simply not allow that. We are not preparing in any way to question the fact of the Armenian Genocide, or to pretend that we believe that Turkey can play any diplomatic role in the process of finding a solution to the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh," Sarkysyan was quoted as saying by Armenian media as he spoke to members of the Armenian community there.

"Any new foreign policy is subject to temptations because we are walking down a path no one has walked before. I am confident Armenia will pass this exam with honor," Sarkysyan also said in remarks delivered in Armenian. /Today's Zaman/

Erdogan Meets with Obama on Sidelines of Nuclear Summit

Tuesday's meeting between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and US President Barack Obama took place "in a sincere atmosphere and focused on many issues including Armenia and Iran," diplomats said. Sources said that Erdogan gave information to Obama on Turkey's efforts for peace in the Caucasus and the Middle East.

During the meeting, Erdogan and Obama agreed on the necessity for the continuation of talks between Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and his US counterpart Hillary Clinton on the Caucasus. Prime Minister Erdogan also conveyed his thoughts on Iran's nuclear program to President Obama. Obama informed Erdogan that the US appreciated

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Turkey's diplomacy and efforts for peace in the region and requested Turkey's constructive contributions to continue. The meeting was schedule to take place in 15 minutes but lasted 45 minutes.

Erdoğan also had brief talks with various leaders including the French president and German chancellor on Monday. Prior to the summit, the prime minister met with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Davutoğlu also held talks during Nuclear Security Summit. Davutoğlu reaffirmed Turkey's commitment to the normalisation process with Armenia and relayed the message that Turkey disapproved of sanctions on Iran. He relayed the message to Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that, "Turkey is committed to the process and works on creative ideas to advance the process."

Clinton gave information to Davutoğlu about the developments regarding the Minsk process and the two discussed normalisation of Turkey-Armenia relations and reform works in Bosnia-Herzegovina. /Anadolu Ajansi - Today's Zaman/

Davutoglu Turkey Will Not Approve Iran Sanctions

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said Saturday that it would be out of the question for Turkey to approve a sanctions package envisioned for Iran in advance unless details of the package are revealed.

Speaking to Turkish reporters in Brazil, Davutoğlu said he would pay a visit to Iran next week and assess recent developments, including new ideas regarding a solution to the problem through diplomatic means.

"It is out of the question for Turkey to discuss a sanctions package that we don't know the details of," the foreign minister said.

Davutoğlu added that Turkey is a neighbor of Iran and may be one of the countries to pay the highest price. "We cannot confirm the package in advance. All means should be exhausted," he said. "After all efforts are exhausted, all members of the U.N. Security Council should again discuss the measure. We know how we suffered from the embargoes on Iraq."

Turkey and Brazil's stances on Iran's nuclear program are close to each other, the foreign minister added. "Brazil also favors a solution to the problem through diplomatic means," he said. "We think this problem may be solved without a need for new sanctions and without new military tensions erupting." /Hurriyet/

Turkey's Government Works on Possible Constitutional Compromise

The main opposition party leader criticized Friday the prime minister and president for ambivalent remarks on a possible compromise on the reform package, but left the door open for a probable deal until Monday.

"We made a historic call to the ruling party [Justice and Development Party (AKP)] on April 6 and said our party will support the rest of the package if the AKP excluded the

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three controversial articles from the reform package," said Deniz Baykal, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) speaking at a press conference Friday.

"Today is April 16 [Friday] and we are behind our proposal. Nobody should try to blur the atmosphere and pervert the issue. It is not the CHP that changed, but the AKP which has demonstrated conflicting stances to our suggestion," he said.

Following its initial proposal to separate the package's most controversial three articles concerning the judiciary and procedural changes to make party closures more difficult, the CHP then presented a second suggestion on April 12, asking the government to delay the three controversial articles until after the 2011 elections.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initially responded positively to Baykal's proposal to exclude the three controversial articles from the package. After the CHP made its second offer, however, Erdoğan displayed a negative stance, saying his government would not consider the CHP's offer. Erdoğan even accused the CHP of not being sincere on the issue. According to Baykal, the CHP is open to possible suggestions from the AKP for reaching a deal on the reform package. /Hurriyet/

Top Official from Interim Kyrgyz Government Visits Ankara

President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan separately received Almazbek Atambayev, the first deputy prime minister of the Kyrgyz interim government. Atambayev briefed Gul on the latest developments in Kyrgyzstan, and for his part, Gul called for dialogue to overcome the country's problems without creating further tensions.

Gul said that Turkey is ready to do all it can to help and support the friendly Kyrgyz nation. Atambayev told a press conference that they will change Kyrgyzstan's presidential system to a parliamentary one. Later, Erdogan hosted a dinner for Atambayev, with guests including Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Deputy Chairman Omer Celik, and Prime Ministry Deputy Undersecretary Hakan Fidan. /Turkish Press Review/

Eroglu Wins Elections in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

Dervis Eroğlu, a hard-line challenger and currently the Prime Minister, has claimed a victory in a key Turkish Cypriot presidential election and vows to continue peace talks with Greek Cypriots. He is now the third president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Eroğlu garnered 50.38 percent of the vote in the seven-candidate election, while current President Mehmet Ali Talat came second with 42.85 percent, according to unofficial results. Tahsin Ertuğuloğlu, a third candidate who defected from Eroğlu's party, received 3.81 percent of the vote.

Roughly 164,000 voters went to the ballot booths. The turnout of 76.37 percent was stronger than five years ago, up from around 69 percent. After the number of votes received by Eroğlu surpassed 50 percent, his supporters rushed to Atatürk Square of Nicosia to celebrate the victory.

Eroğlu addressed supporters who congregated outside his party headquarters on Sunday,

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saying that he will represent the Turkish Cypriot at negotiations aimed at reunifying the divided island. Many feared that an Eroğlu win over leftist incumbent Talat could lead peace talks to collapse, jeopardizing Turkey's European Union membership bid.

"Talks will continue because I want peace more than those who say that I don't," Eroğlu told supporters at a rally after preliminary results indicated he had won. "I seek a solution based on the realities of the island and a solution that all of us can live with."

Turkish President Abdullah Gul on Sunday sent a message and congratulated Eroglu. The Presidency Press Center released a statement and quoted Gul as saying that both Turkey and the TRNC wished ongoing talks won Cyprus to achieve a fair and permanent solution.

"I have the full belief that TRNC will be more strong and prosperous and integrate with the international community during your term in office as president," Gul noted. Gul also expressed his belief that Eroglu would maintain UN comprehensive negotiations for solution with the same dynamism and constructive approach that has been displayed so far and exert any necessary efforts to conclude the talks in the shortest amount of time. /Today's Zaman - Hurriyet -Anadolu Ajansi/

April 19-25, 2010

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Davutoglu Meets Top Iranian Officials to Push for Diplomatic Solution to Iranian Nuke Issue

Amid mounting US-led efforts to impose tougher sanctions on Iran for its controversial nuclear program, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu on Tuesday met with top Iranian officials in Tehran in a bid to again push for a diplomatic solution. Davutoglu was received by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and also met with his Iranian counterpart Manouchehr Mottaki, National Security Council Secretary Said Jalili, and Parliament Speaker and former top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani.

Speaking at a joint press conference after meeting with Mottaki, Davutoglu underlined the urgent need for a uranium swap deal between Iran and major Western powers, saying this could improve the international atmosphere on the issue. Stressing that Turkey is ready to do whatever is needed towards that end, he added, "Through diplomatic efforts, Turkey is trying to forestall possible negative developments that could harm both the region and our countries. We're exchanging views on new alternatives to avert negative possibilities."

Declining to elaborate on what he called "new alternatives" to solve the issue, Davutoglu reiterated Turkey's determination to broker a possible exchange of Iran's low-grade

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uranium stockpile with high-grade uranium provided by Western countries. Stating that Turkey would continue its efforts to cool tensions, Davutoglu said, "Turkey will be the first country (after Iran) to feel the positive or negative effects of developments in Iran. Accordingly, we're working to ensure a solution to this issue that will make seeking tougher sanctions on Iran at the UN Security Council unnecessary." Turkey is currently a temporary member of the council.

Following his trip to Iran, Davutoglu on Wednesday met in Brussels with European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy Stefan Fule and EU Foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton. The Iranian nuclear controversy and Turkey's efforts to broker a diplomatic solution dominated their talks, and recent developments in the southern Caucasus were also discussed. "I conveyed my impressions from talks with Iranian officials," Davutoglu told reporters afterwards.

Davutoglu also participate in an informal meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Tallinn, Estonia. NATO's new Strategic Concept, NATO reform, enlargement, partnerships, missile defense and Afghanistan were among the topics discussed. /Turkish Press Review/

Armenia Freezes Ratification Process on Protocols with Turkey just before April 24

Armenia's ruling coalition on Thursday said it had decided to freeze the process of parliamentary ratification of accords with Turkey aimed at normalizing ties between the historic foes. "The Turkish side's refusal to fulfill the requirement to ratify the accord without preconditions in a reasonable time has made the continuation of the ratification process in the national parliament pointless," the coalition said in a statement.

"We consider it necessary to suspend this process until Turkey is ready to continue the process without preconditions," the statement said. The move came only two days before US President Barack Obama issued his annual April 24 statement to commemorate the Armenians that perished in Ottoman Anatolia in the beginning of the last century.

Obama says he is personally convinced that the killings constituted genocide -- a claim Turkey firmly denies -- but has never used the g-word since he became president, saying he does not want to harm Turkish-Armenian normalization efforts. He refrained from using the word in his address again this year.

The ruling party's statement is unlikely to have any practical effect on the process since two protocols signed by the two countries' foreign ministers in October are already waiting in both national parliaments for ratification at an unspecified date.

In Ankara, Turkish officials were cautious. "How to run the normalization process is an affair we will decide upon," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told reporters in Ankara. Erdoğan has said repeatedly that the Turkish-Armenian normalization process was unlikely to succeed without an Armenian withdrawal from Azerbaijani territory that has been occupied by Armenian forces since the early 1990s and the war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

"The political majority in the national assembly considers statements from the Turkish

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side in recent days as unacceptable, specifically those by Prime Minister Erdoğan, who has again made the ratification of the Armenia-Turkish protocols by the Turkish parliament directly dependent on a resolution over Nagorno-Karabakh," the statement from the Armenian ruling coalition said.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was in Tallinn attending a NATO ministerial meeting, called Erdoğan upon learning about the statement, spokesman Burak Özügergin, who accompanied the minister, told the Anatolia news agency.

"We are making an analysis of how this move should be read, what meaning it has and its content. We are assessing what steps could be taken," Özügergin added. /Today's Zaman/

Turkey, Serbia and the EU Bolster Bid to Integrate Balkans

On the eve of two back-to-back high-level meetings of NATO and the European Union, the foreign ministers of Serbia, Spain and Turkey came together late Tuesday night in Belgrade to deliver the strongest message yet on a common vision for the integration of the Western Balkans into the European system.

The tripartite meeting, organized at the request of Spain, which holds rotating EU presidency, aimed to push the issues of Western Balkan countries onto EU and NATO platforms. "I came to Serbia ... not only as the Spanish foreign minister but as [the holder of] the EU rotating presidency to share ... our vision of Western Balkans integration," Miguel Angel Moratinos, the Spanish foreign minister, told reporters after the meeting.

The meeting came just two days before NATO foreign ministers converge today on the Estonian capital of Tallinn, where both Turkey and Spain are expected to lobby hard for the approval of a membership action plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"We have been working with Spain to get a membership action plan for Bosnia in Tallinn. We've observed some positive developments to that effect recently, and we intend to follow up on that in the Estonian capital," Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said following the talks with his Serbian and Spanish counterparts.

Davutoğlu's remarks were reciprocated by his Spanish counterpart, who said: "We came to project a common vision for a full, secure and prosperous Balkan region. We will work to get a membership action plan [MAP] for Bosnia in the next [NATO] meeting." Both Madrid and Ankara back NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina, saying international isolation could exacerbate the instability in the country, which could ultimately lead to the secession of the Republika Srpska by Serb nationalists.

Turkish diplomats said Davutoğlu later called current Bosnian Presidency Chairman Haris Silajdzic to update him about the progress made at the Belgrade meeting. Stressing that both Turkey and the EU are critical players in the Western Balkans, Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, who hosted the meeting, said the central strategic goal is to attain the prospect of EU membership for all Balkan states. He described the meeting as "an

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exchange of opinions among friends who share a common vision which is a stable, prosperous and integrated Balkans," adding, "There is full agreement on this one."

Jeremic conceded that there are some disagreements among the three countries, but emphasized the complete readiness on all sides to resolve these disagreements. The status of Kosovo's participation in the upcoming EU-Western Balkans summit, which the Spanish EU presidency plans to hold in Sarajevo on June 2, tops the list of disagreements.

The issue was also discussed at the trilateral meeting in Belgrade. Serbia, which does not recognize the secession of Kosovo, objects to Kosovo's participation as a sovereign member. Spain and Turkey, proponents of further integration of the Western Balkans in the EU, are trying to salvage the June 2 summit by working on a new plan for how Kosovo will be represented at the summit. /Today's Zaman/

Voting Begins on Turkish Constitutional Reform

The discussions on the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP's), constitutional amendments package began on Monday with high tension, as the government's reform package narrowly passed, receiving 333 of the minimum 330 votes from deputies. The package passed the vote on the first day of discussions, allowing Parliament to move forward and discuss its individual articles in more detail.

The constitutional amendment proposals are being voted on in two rounds in the General Assembly, and the articles do not need to garner the minimum 330 votes in the first round. However, the AKP has been exerting a great effort to push the package's most critical articles, which concern the restructuring of Turkey's judges and prosecutor's board and Constitutional Court, over the 330-vote threshold in the first round. If articles receive less than 330 votes in the second round, they will be dropped.

Exhausted and overworked, both the ruling party and main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) deputies have been alternating their participation in the parliamentary discussions, whereas the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) deputies have been continuously following the whole process.

The CHP and the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) expressed their opposition to the reform package but did not participate in the voting process on Tuesday, the second day of discussions. With insistent demands to take roll call, the CHP and the MHP, meanwhile, attempted to delay the start of the session.

Three articles, which concern travel rights abroad, the protection of the family and public servants' membership in unions, were adopted Tuesday. Prime Minister Erdoğan cancelled a previously scheduled trip to Italy due to the sensitivity of the voting process. /Hurriyet/

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