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CONTENTS:

- Fuele Reaffirms Support to Turkey's EU Membership Bid; Sweden Supports Turkey's EU Reforms
- Armenian Deportation Remarks Draw Ire Locally and Abroad
- Erdogan Touts Turkish Economy to British Investors
- President Gul Visits Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon

Fuele Reaffirms Support to Turkey's EU Membership Bid; Sweden Supports Turkey's EU Reforms

EU Commissioner for enlargement Stefan Fuele on Monday reaffirmed his support to Turkey's accession talks and bid to join the European Union (EU). Fuele also underlined his support to efforts to normalize relations between Turkey and Armenia while speaking at a joint news conference with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in Ankara.

Fuele said he welcomed Turkey's policy of zero problems with its neighbors, which was discussed at the meeting. He also welcomed historical steps made between Turkey and Armenia to normalize relations. Fuele revealed that they also discussed the Cyprus question, adding that implementation of the Additional Protocol was important for the EU and urging Turkey to normalize relations with the Greek Cypriot party. The Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement foresees extension of Turkey's customs union deal to ten countries that joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, including the Greek Cypriot Administration.

Fuele noted that visa liberalization was important both for Turkey and the EU. He stated that studies to liberalize visas could start in the event that progress was made to deal with illegal migration to Europe via Turkey.

In related news, the Swedish government has announced that it will provide not only political, but also financial assistance to reforms that have been fulfilled in Turkey on its path toward European Union membership. The move is part of the Swedish government's newly adopted strategy for developing cooperation with Turkey for the period 2010-2013.

"Turkey's future membership in the EU remains the strongest incentive for further democratic reforms in the country. Through this new strategy, Sweden is strengthening its support for the development of closer relations between Turkey and the EU," said Minister for International Development Cooperation Gunilla Carlsson.

Relations between Turkey and Sweden soured after the Swedish parliament narrowly approved a resolution March 11 recognizing the 1915 killing of Armenians during the last days of the Ottoman Empire as "genocide." Turkey recalled its ambassador and cancelled a high-level Turkish-Swedish meeting in protest.

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Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt has expressed regret over the parliament's decision, urging the Turkish government to prevent any deterioration in relations.

Sweden's broad commitment to Turkey also includes academic cooperation administered by the Swedish Institute. Grant programs provide Turkish students with the opportunity to study human rights and European studies in Sweden, while Swedish students are given the opportunity to conduct "minor field studies" in Turkey. /Anadolu Ajansi - Hurriyet/

Armenian Deportation Remarks Draw Ire Locally and Abroad

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's remarks about the possible deportation of undocumented Armenian workers from Turkey after US and Swedish lawmakers passed resolutions branding the World War I-era killings of Anatolian Armenians as genocide have sparked reactions both in Yerevan and in Ankara.

"Look, there are 170,000 Armenians in my country -- 70,000 of them are my citizens, but we are [tolerating] 100,000 of them [illegally] in our country. So, what will we do tomorrow? If it is necessary, I will tell them, 'Come on, back to your country.' I will do it. Why? They are not my citizens. I am not obliged to keep them in my country. I mean these are [defenders of the Armenian claims of genocide]. Their attitude is negatively affecting our sincere attitude, and they are not aware of it," Erdoğan told the BBC Turkish service in an interview on Tuesday.

Erdoğan's comments met with a stern reaction from Armenia. "This kind of political statement does not help improve relations between the two states," said Armenian Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan. "I agree with the assessment that when the Turkish prime minister allows himself to make such statements, the events of 1915 immediately return to our memory," he added.

Thousands of illegal Armenian immigrants, mostly women from the impoverished countryside, work as cleaning ladies and in other low-skilled jobs in İstanbul, where many settled after an earthquake in their homeland in 1988. The exact number of Armenian immigrants in Turkey is unknown. But Turkish-Armenian groups say Turkish politicians inflate the numbers of illegal workers and threaten expulsions whenever tensions escalate between Ankara and Yerevan.

In Ankara, Deniz Baykal, the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), called Erdoğan's remarks "grave" and "against human rights." "Wanting to use people who came to Turkey for work as a trump card in the resolution of a dispute is definitely unacceptable and is against human rights. Various people may have some ideas, an opposition party deputy may also say something, but these are not statements that have results -- perhaps you can call them inappropriate statements. But when a prime minister, a person who has the authority to deport them, says such things, then it is very grave," Baykal told his party's parliamentary group meeting on Wednesday. /Today's Zaman/

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Erdogan Touts Turkish Economy to British Investors

Speaking at a meeting of the Turkey-Britain Business Forum in London, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey had managed to weather the global financial crisis with minimal damage, with its financial system having felt almost no impact from the crisis. "While many banks and companies in the US and Europe faced tough times during the crisis, Turkish banks didn't see any difficulties," he said.

Stating that Turkey's ties with Britain have picked up in recent years, Erdogan said, "Turkey and Britain engaged in model cooperation at both the regional and global levels, in an example for all of Europe." Stressing that economic and trade cooperation constitutes an important part of Turkey's ties with Britain, Erdogan called on British entrepreneurs to take advantage of Turkey's rapidly developing investment environment and dynamic young population. He further said Turkey is on the way to becoming the shining star of its region.

Also speaking at the meeting, British Justice Minister Jack Straw said the Turkish economy proved its resilience during the global economic crisis. "This showed how sound and strong Turkey's financial system and industry are," he added. Stating that Turkish products are in demand in the British market, Straw praised the quality of these products, especially Turkey's white goods (small appliances).

State Minister for Foreign Trade Zafer Caglayan told the gathering that half of all refrigerators sold in British market are Turkish-made. Underlining what he called deep economic and trade ties between Turkey and Britain, Caglayan said the good attendance of Turkish and British businesspeople at the meeting showed this. Caglayan also expressed hope that trade between the two countries, which dipped due to the crisis, would resume its upward trend this year in line with global recovery from the crisis. /Turkish Press Review/

President Gul Visits Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon

Turkish President Abdullah Gül said on Monday that Turkey is "Africa's voice" in international platforms, during a joint news conference with Democratic Republic of the Congo President Joseph Kabila in Kinshasa.

Gül and Kabila held a bilateral meeting and then jointly chaired a committee gathering between the two countries after an official ceremony hosted by Kabila. During the meeting, the two countries signed an agreement to establish a political counseling mechanism. The agreement was signed by Foreign Ministry Deputy Undersecretary Ünal Çeviköz and DR Congo Foreign Minister Alexis Thambwe Mwamba.

Noting that this visit marks the first time that a Turkish president has visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gül said he believes his visit will open a new page in bilateral relations. Underlining that Turkey attaches great importance to relations with DR Congo, Gül said Turkey's African initiative continues.

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Selected News on Turkey

"We have a 34-year-old embassy here, and this shows how we value our relations with DR Congo," Gül said. Saying that he believes the Turkish businessmen accompanying him will have successful meetings with their local counterparts, Gül said DR Congo has enough political will to develop economic relations with Turkey.

Stressing that DR Congo is awash with natural resources and needs to efficiently use them, Gül said DR Congo has displayed an important transformation in the last few years. President Gül stressed they expressed the decisiveness to develop bilateral relations in every sphere and exchanged views on ways to achieve that. In his speech President Kabila said they have already decided to open an embassy in Ankara to advance their relations with Turkey. He also added that the agreement they signed with Turkey would contribute greatly to the development of relations with Turkey.

Gul also held talks in Yaounde, Cameroon during his African tour. His Cameroonian counterpart Paul Biya decorated Gul with a medal of merit, followed by a one-and-a-half-hour meeting and the signing of agreements on mutual visa exemptions as well as technical, scientific, agricultural and economic cooperation.

Biya also hosted a dinner in Gul's honor at the country's presidential palace. Speaking at the dinner, Gul noted that Turkey and Cameroon are determined to boost their friendly ties. Stating that stronger cooperation in such areas as agriculture, health and education would benefit both sides, Gul said Turkey wants to improve bilateral ties with African countries in a number of areas.

Gul also pledged that Turkey will continue to be the voice of African nations on international platforms. "We're well aware that Turkey couldn't have secured a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council without support from African countries, and no doubt Turkey, at both the UN Security Council and other international platforms, will pull its weight to help solve problems facing Africa," Gul said.

He added that Turkey plans to open embassies in 10 more African countries in addition its current 18 representative offices across the continent. Gul also called on Turkish investors to invest in Cameroon's mining, health and education sectors. Before leaving for. /Today's Zaman - Turkish Press Review/

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