



Armenia, Turkey Wait While US Considers Recognizing Genocide

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YEREVAN, Armenia (UPI) -- Inside the tomb-like confines of the Armenian genocide museum, a haunting narrative of images and words unfolds. A list is posted at tour's end of Western nations that have officially recognized the tragedy, minus one major endorsement: the United States.

U.S. lawmakers have recently introduced non-binding resolutions that would declare up to 1.5 million Armenians victims of genocide at the hands of Turkish forces almost a century ago. Support is reported to be strong enough in the House to pass the measure if it goes to a vote; the Senate introduced a similar resolution last Wednesday with 21co-sponsors.

Historians and analysts here say recognition from Washington is long overdue since evidence validating the case for genocide is "clear-cut, more than factual, and very obvious." But Turkey's priority status as a vital strategic ally in a troublesome region stands in the way.

"Although Turkey needs the U.S. more, the U.S. also needs Turkey right now . . . so it's not realistic to think the government will formally acknowledge [the genocide]," Hagop Avedikian, editor of Azg newspaper, said. He noted that every April 24, a day of observance, President Bush "highlights the genocide and explains it without using the word."

In the past month, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, Chief of the General Staff Gen. Yasar Buyukanit and a parliamentary delegation have met with congressmen and administration officials to derail the resolution. Gul was quoted as saying the delivery of a U.S. genocide resolution would inflict "lasting damage" on bilateral relations.

Such statements were not lost on Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who last week wrote a joint letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other senior members warning against a measure they said would harm national security interests. [Articles on this Issue](#)

Passage of the House resolution "could harm American troops in the field, constrain our ability to supply our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and significantly damage our efforts to promote reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey," the letter said according to the Associated Press.

Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried has said Turkey might respond by closing Incirlik Air Base, used for operations in nearby Iraq and Afghanistan. Rice and Gates pointed out how the Turkish military severed all ties with the French military and terminated defense contracts after the French National Assembly voted last October to criminalize denial of the genocide.

The Israeli Knesset killed a motion to discuss possible recognition earlier this month, fearing a political crisis with Ankara.

Failure to pass the resolution would be "too bad because it could be a very catalytic moment for rapid recognition by other states," Hayk Demoyan, director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, said. U.S. backing could give Armenians leverage to press for compensation and possible territorial claims, he added.

However, a raft of Western countries have already recognized the genocide and made denial a punishable offense. An ethnic Turkish politician, Dogu Perincek, received a \$2,500 fine and a suspended prison sentence from a Swiss court last Friday for calling the genocide an "international lie" at a political rally two years ago.

The dispute is over whether hundreds of thousands of Armenians who died between 1915-23 were part of systematic eradication campaign by Ottoman Turkey. Armenians contend mass killings and forced deportations amount to genocide, while the Turkish government insists the deaths were the result of chaos amid the breakdown of the former empire.

Critics say the Turkish state's reluctance to confront the Armenian issue is but one facet of a broader identity crisis that is starting to show ugly symptoms.

"Textbooks [in Turkey] have for decades placed taboos on certain issues. To confront them would be catastrophic for the national identity," Demoyan said.

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The latest schism followed the Jan. 19 killing of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in broad daylight on a heavily trafficked Istanbul street. An unprecedented number of people, estimated at more than 100,000, turned out in protest, chanting: "We are all Armenians."

The 17-year-old killer claimed to have shot him because "he had insulted the Turks" and said he felt no remorse. Photographs surfaced soon after his arrest showing the teenager posing with smiling police officers beneath a Turkish flag.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reportedly said the protesters went "too far."

There are renewed fears in Armenia that the backlash from the military-dominated state will be felt by Armenians and other ethnic minorities in the near future. After he saw the demonstrations on TV after Dink's murder, Avedikian said he was afraid, along with many of his Armenian friends in Istanbul and elsewhere, who are "convinced Turkey will become even more radical."

Avedikian asserted that the softer line that has prevailed in recent years may change in light of now-suspended EU accession talks. Appeals to nationalist sentiment may also be a tactic to secure votes in the run-up to November parliamentary elections.

"I have a lot of faith in Turkish intellectuals, but not in the army and those connected with it," he said.

Leftist intellectuals have been hounded by Turkish prosecutors over the past two years for alleged violations of Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which holds that "insulting Turkishness" is a criminal offense. They include Dink and Nobel prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk, who was put on trial for recognizing the genocide, though his case was later dropped.

Pamuk emigrated to the United States after continued harassment and death threats.

By Jason Motlagh

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