



Turkish Academics Plan Apology To Armenia

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ANKARA (Reuters) -- A group of Turkish intellectuals and academics are planning to issue a public apology on the Internet for the mass killings of ethnic Armenians in World War I.

The campaign, which has drawn the ire of nationalists who regard it as an act of national betrayal, coincides with a diplomatic rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia to end almost 100 years of hostility.

Turks, including Nobel Literature Laureate Orhan Pamuk, have been prosecuted in the European Union candidate country for affirming that the mass killings of Armenians in 1915 amount to genocide.

Gengiz Aktar, a professor at Istanbul's Bahcesehir University and one of the campaign's organizers, said the group plans to issue the apology on December 15 along with a non-binding Internet petition to gather signatures.

It will read: "My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to, and the denial of, the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathies with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers. I apologies to them."

Turkey accepts that many Armenians were killed during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, but strongly denies Armenian claims it was genocide, saying that Muslim Turks also died in inter-ethnic conflicts. Western historians have backed Armenian claims that the killings amounted to genocide.

The apology, which has been leaked to the media, threatens to reignite a controversy that challenges one of the ideological foundations of modern Turkey. It also comes at a time of heightened nationalism in Turkey.

Aktar said the initiative was meant to allow Turks to offer a personal apology and to end an official silence. "We are not targeting anyone. It's an apology of individual nature. We want to tell our Armenian brothers and sisters we apologies for not being able to discuss this issue for almost 100 years," he said.

He said the group included 200 writers, intellectuals, and academics. The European Union has repeatedly criticized Turkey for restrictions on free speech, in particular over punishments writers have received for comments on the Armenian issue.

President Abdullah Gul became the first Turkish leader to visit Armenia in September as Turkey has sought to improve ties. Several meetings between Turkish and Armenian officials have followed and the two countries have expressed hopes of restoring full diplomatic relations soon.

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