

ARMENIA HALTS RATIFICATION OF TURKEY PEACE DEAL

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Christian Armenia and Muslim Turkey signed accords in October last year to overcome the legacy of the World War One mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks, but the atmosphere has soured in recent months.

Under the accords, Armenia and Turkey agreed to establish diplomatic ties and open the border within two months of parliamentary approval. Neither parliament has approved the protocols, and Yerevan and Ankara have accused each other of trying to re-write the texts.

"The Turkish side's refusal to fulfil 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," an Armenian coalition statement said.

"We consider it necessary to suspend this process until Turkey is ready to continue the process without preconditions."

The coalition said it decided on the freeze after Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said ratification would depend on a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey's close ally and trading partner, over the disputed mountain region of Nagorno-Karabakh, a position Yerevan sees as unacceptable.

In Ankara, a Foreign Ministry official said Turkey had not received any official information about the suspension of the protocols' ratification.

Armenian President Serzh Sarksyan, who faces resistance from opponents at home and the huge Armenian diaspora abroad, was due to make a statement on national television later on Thursday.

Erdogan, who also faces stiff opposition from nationalists at home, was due to hold a news

conference later on Thursday.

Last week, U.S. President Barack Obama urged Armenia and Turkey to "make every effort" to advance normalisation, which would boost stability in the volatile south Caucasus, a region criss-crossed by pipelines carrying oil and gas to the West.

Obama will make a speech on the mass killings of Armenians on April 24, the 95th anniversary of the events, and was expected to address progress on the accords.

NAGORNO-KARABAGH

Turkey has demanded that ethnic Armenian forces pull back from the frontlines of Nagorno-Karabakh as a condition for ratifying the peace deal. This aroused resistance in Armenia.

The Turkish condition is aimed at placating close Muslim ally Azerbaijan, an oil and gas exporter which lost control over Nagorno-Karabakh when ethnic Armenians backed by Christian Armenia broke away as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Semih Idiz, a foreign affairs columnist for Turkey's Milliyet newspaper, told CNN Turk the Armenian decision was meant to put pressure on Erdogan ahead of April 24, when Armenians will again press Obama to fulfil a campaign pledge to label the killings as genocide.

"There's nothing to upset Ankara too much. This does not mean the process is over...This is a personal call to Erdogan, since he made the Nagorno-Karabakh precondition," Idiz said.

If ratified, the deal, signed with endorsement of the U.S., European Union and Russia, would bring economic gains to poor, landlocked Armenia. It would help Turkey burnish its credentials as a EU candidate and boost its clout in the Caucasus.

The deal is the closest the sides have come to overcoming the legacy of the mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War One, a defining element of Armenian national identity and a constant thorn in the side of modern Turkey.

Muslim Turkey accepts many Christian Armenians died in partisan fighting beginning in 1915 but denies that up to 1.5 million were killed and that it amounted to genocide -- a term employed by some Western historians and foreign parliaments.

(Additional reporting by Ibon Villeda and Tulay Karadeniz in Ankara and Ayla Jean Yackley in Istanbul; Writing by Ibon Villeda and Conor Humphries; Editing by Diana Abdallah)

