FOOTBALL DIPLOMACY

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Category: Opinions

The Economist, Ankara, 3 September 2009

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AFTER decades of fierce animosity, are Turkey and Armenia getting closer to peace? This week the two countries announced plans for six weeks of “internal political consultations” before establishing diplomatic ties and reopening their border. Coming after several months of Swiss mediation and arm-twisting by America, the declaration makes reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia a real prospect—but not a foregone conclusion.

Hopes of a new friendship blossomed in September 2008 when Turkey’s president, Abdullah Gul, became the first modern Turkish leader to visit Armenia, for a football World Cup qualifier (which Armenia lost). A full deal seemed imminent in April when the two countries initialled a preliminary agreement, including a plan to reopen the border. This was sealed by the Turks in 1993 in solidarity with their Azeri cousins during Azerbaijan’s short, sharp war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a mainly Armenian enclave of Azerbaijan (which Armenia won).

Turkey had earlier insisted that it would not reopen the border until Armenia and Azerbaijan had

made peace. But in April it seemed to change tack. The main reason was to stop America's Congress adopting a resolution to label the mass slaughter of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 as genocide. It worked: Barack Obama did not use the term in his annual April 24th statement on the anniversary of the killings.

Yet days later the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, reverted to previous policy by insisting that peace with Armenia would come only if the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was solved. The switch back reflected nationalist reaction at home as well as Azerbaijan's threat to turn towards Russia. Armenia's president, Serzh Sargsyan, retaliated by saying he would not attend a return football match in Turkey on October 14th unless the border was on the verge of being reopened.

This week's announcement is calculated to ensure that Mr Sargsyan comes to the match, maintaining the façade of reconciliation. By careful coincidence the time for internal political consultations ends just before the match. Links of various sorts between the two countries are growing fast and Armenian tourists have been flocking to the Turkish coast. Yet hostility to a deal from opposition parties in both countries is strong.

Armenia's hardline nationalists are furious that the government has agreed both to the present border and to a joint historical commission that might yet call the genocide into doubt. They also accuse Mr Sargsyan of selling out Karabakh. Even if the April 22nd deal is accepted, another hurdle has been raised: both countries' parliaments must agree. To stifle domestic anger (and perhaps embarrass the Turks) Armenia also chose to publish the full text of the agreements in April. They do not mention Nagorno-Karabakh.

Turkey's response has been contradictory. Its foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, insists that he hopes that the border will be reopened by the end of the year. But he also says that peace with Armenia is sustainable only if it makes peace with Azerbaijan. Long-running talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan seem to be going nowhere. Mr Davutoglu's most accurate assertion may be that Turkey and Armenia are at the start of a "long process." How long is anybody's guess.

Congressional Armenian Caucus Co-Chairmen Voice Concerns Over Protocols

Asbarez.com, 3 September 2009

WASHINGTON–The Co-Chairmen of the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues, Representatives Frank Pallone (D-NJ) and Mark Kirk (R-IL) today expressed their reservations regarding Turkey's willingness to cooperate in the implementation of its agreements under a set of recently signed protocols on the normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations, reported the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA).

In a public statement, the two legislators called into question several points related to the protocols, including Turkey's pattern of using its ongoing dialogue with Armenia as a "stall tactic" to delay the lifting of its illegal 16-year blockade of Armenia. The Co-Chairman also noted their concern

regarding Turkey's efforts to impose preconditions, stressing that: "Normalization of relations should take place without preconditions." In a clear rebuke to the "historical commission" long advanced by Turkey, they set forth their view that: "Any attempt to include a review of historical fact, such as the Armenian Genocide, or to include the ongoing Nagorno Karabakh peace process into these negotiations stands in direct opposition to the intent of these talks."

The leaders of the Armenian Caucus closed their statement by expressing their hope that, "Turkey, by lifting its illegal blockade, will open the door to normalized relations between Yerevan and Ankara, and a new era of Armenia-Turkey relations based on truth, justice, peace and cooperation."

Earlier this week, Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA), the lead author of the Armenian Genocide Resolution, expressed "serious concerns about some provisions of the protocols," stating that "In particular, I was deeply disappointed to see that the protocols call for the creation of an historical commission to review the events of 1915-23. This is a thoroughly discredited idea; there is no dispute among scholars that the Armenian people were the subject of genocide during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire and an historical commission is another effort to obfuscate the truth."

Rep. Schiff went on to state that "True reconciliation between the Armenian and Turkish peoples will occur when Turkey acknowledges the genocide that was committed by the Ottoman Empire against Armenians from 1915 – 1923."

On Tuesday, the ANCA circulated a memo to Members of Congress, noting that "among primary concerns is that Armenia, blockaded by Turkey and under intense economic and diplomatic pressure, was forced into accepting terms that threaten her interests, rights, safety, and future – very notably in the form of a proposed 'historical commission.'" The memo went on to note that "This provision, a tactic long pursued by Ankara to cast doubt on the historical record of the Armenian Genocide, is intended to serve Turkey's drive to roll back the growing tide of international recognition of this crime against humanity. There can be no enduring relationship between Armenia and Turkey that is not built upon the foundation of Turkey's acceptance of a true and just resolution of this crime."

Armenian Americans began expressing their concerns to Members of Congress through an ANCA WebFax campaign urging lawmakers to call for an investigation into State Department pressure on Armenia to agree to the inclusion of a 'historical commission' – an affront to descendants of Armenian Genocide victims and survivors around the world.