

Turkey Not Ready to Return Envoy to Washington

Turkey said on Tuesday that Ankara is not ready to send its ambassador back to Washington after a US Congress panel branded the massacre of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as genocide.

"As long as the situation does not get any clearer we will not send back our ambassador to Washington," Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told journalists in Riyadh, AFP reported.

"America should not let go of a strategic ally like Turkey over such an issue," he added, describing the US House Foreign Affairs Committee's decision as "a comedy stunt."

An infuriated Turkey recalled its ambassador Namik Tan on Thursday, shortly after the panel narrowly approved the non-binding resolution.

The decision now opens the door for a vote at the full House of Representatives.

In a bid to limit the fallout of the committee's decision, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Friday the administration would "work very hard" to stop the resolution from going before the full house.

The resolution calls on President Barack Obama to ensure that US foreign policy reflects an understanding of



Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (C) arrives for a news conference in Riyadh on March 9.

the "genocide" and to label the mass killings as such in his annual statement on the issue.

Armenians say up to 1.5 million of their kin were killed during World War I by their Ottoman rulers in a planned campaign of extermination as the empire was falling apart,

a stance that is supported by several other countries.

The massacres followed a roundup in Istanbul on April 24, 1915, the date on which Armenians each year hold rallies around the world.

Turkey categorically rejects the genocide label, arguing that between 300,000 and 500,000 Armenians and at least as many Turks were killed in civil strife when Armenians rose up for independence and sided with invading Russian forces.

> Reviving Talks

Israel might accept Turkey as a mediator to restart stalled talks between Syria and Israel, Erdogan said.

While Israel has not yet endorsed Syria's proposal of Ankara as an interlocutor in their frozen peace talks, it is moving in that direction, he told journalists.

"There is an interest in revitalizing these talks. Syria wants Turkey as the mediator," he said.

"Israel has been moving on this so possibly we can restart talks, I hope," he said. The last round of Turkish-mediated indirect peace talks was launched in May 2008 but collapsed at the end of that year when Israel launched a devastating military offensive in Gaza.

Biden Assures Israel of Security Support

1,600 New Homes Approved

US Vice President Joe Biden assured Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday that Israel enjoyed Washington's unstinting support for its security and repeated US intent to curb Iran's nuclear program.

"There is no space between the United States and Israel when it comes to Israel's security," Biden said as the two leaders made statements to the media following talks in Beit-ul-Moqaddas, Reuters reported.

This was a message Biden had been widely expected to bring in person from President Barack Obama. Israeli political sources have said he is also making clear Washington does not want Israel to risk any military action against Iran while the United States is seeking a wide coalition for sanctions on Tehran.

Biden said he welcomed Netanyahu's move this week to begin US-mediated indirect talks with the Palestinians and said he hoped it would lead to direct negotiations that would produce a historic peace treaty.

Biden is due to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on today.

> New Homes Approved

Israel approved the construction of 1,600 new homes for Jews in east Beit-ul-Moqaddas, threatening to cloud a visit by Vice President Joe Biden.

The Interior Ministry says the units will go up in the neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo, in the part of the city Palestinians claim for a future capital.

Israel has annexed east Beit-ul-Moqaddas and refuses to restrict building there. The Palestinians and the international community regard construction there as settlement activity.

> Indirect Talks Begin

Palestinians and Israelis held their first indirect talks in more than a year in a tentative boost to the Middle East peace process, frozen since Tel Aviv's devastating war on Gaza.

US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley confirmed to reporters in Washington that the talks had started on Monday under the mediation of US Middle East envoy George Mitchell.

"As to how substantive the discussions were today, George is on his way back (to Washington). He will report to the secretary," Crowley said, referring to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The talks mark the first time the Palestinians and Israelis have come together in any form since Israel launched its 22-day war on Gaza in December 2009.

The Palestinians were however angry at Israel's decision on Monday to give the go-ahead for 112 new homes to be built in an illegal Jewish settlement in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian West Bank.

Israel made the move despite announcing a partial moratorium on such construction late last year, with the news breaking just as US Vice President Joe Biden was set to arrive in the region.

Israeli Environment Minister Gilad Erdan said the project in the Beitar Illit settlement near Bethlehem was an exception to the partial halt of settlement activity announced in November.

"At the end of last year, the regime decided to freeze construction, but this decision provided for exceptions in cases of safety problems for infrastructure projects started before the freeze," Erdan told army radio.



Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu and US Vice President Joe Biden (L) take part in a joint news conference in Beit-ul-Moqaddas on March 9.

Jordan's King to Discuss Mideast Peace in Moscow

Jordan's King Abdullah II will travel to Moscow on Wednesday for a "working visit" to Russia, the royal court announced on Tuesday.

The monarch is scheduled to have talks with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on the "latest Middle East developments, particularly efforts under way to accomplish a solution for

the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the basis of the two-state vision," a royal court statement said, DPA reported.

The king was in London for talks with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown on Tuesday aimed at mustering global support for the two-state solution and envisaging the creation of an independent Palestinian state peace-

fully coexisting with Israel, officials said.

The Jordanian head of state also wants to ramp up world pressure to stop unilateral Israeli steps in Beit-ul-Moqaddas, many of which are seen as encroaching on Muslim and Christian holy places in East Beit-ul-Moqaddas.

Israel annexed East Beit-ul-Mo-

qaddas from Jordan in the 1967 Middle East war.

King Abdullah's tour comes ahead of his meeting in Amman on Thursday with US Vice-President Joe Biden, who is currently on aregional tour that coincides with the launching of US-brokered indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Sudan Polls a Sideshow to Referendum

Self-determination is south Sudan's absolute priority and no delay in national elections should affect the January 2011 referendum on southern independence, the south's top leader said on Tuesday.

Salva Kiir, also Sudan's vice president, told the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) bloc which brokered the 2005 peace deal that south Sudanese took the referen-

dum more importantly than the polls set for April, AFP reported.

"The conduct of the elections is not a pre-requisite to the conduct of the referendum," Kiir said during IGAD's gathering in Nairobi, the first summit since the inking of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

"The people of southern Sudan attach more importance to the referendum than the elections. For them the

right of self-determination is one of their biggest political achievements in the CPA and they will defend it at any cost," he added.

"I ardently appeal to you all that the CPA is fully implemented and as per its timetable. I urge you all to recognize and respect the choice of the people of southern Sudan during the 2011 referendum," he added.

Leaders of the six-nation IGAD east

African body met in Nairobi to assess the implementation of the CPA ahead of the two landmark events in Sudan.

The April elections will be the first multi-party polls since 1986, while the 2011 secession vote will be held at the end of the CPA six-year interim period.

IGAD Secretary General Mahboub Maalim urged the bloc's leaders to carefully consider the events before and after the two key political events.

News in Brief

Lebanon Groups Resume National Dialogue

Lebanon's rival political groups have resumed national reconciliation talks and Hezbollah's weapons are a main topic on the agenda.

According to AP, leaders of more than a dozen factions were meeting at the presidential palace for Tuesday's talks headed by President Michel Suleiman. The dialogue is part of a peace deal reached in Qatar in May 2008 that ended sectarian clashes and defused a crisis.

The factions have conducted similar dialogues every few months since. The last session was held before parliament elections in June.

But they have so far made no progress on a defense strategy that would eventually integrate Hezbollah's weapons into the Lebanese regular armed forces.

The sides remain deeply at odds over the fate of the Islamic militant group's arsenal.

Yemen's Saleh Warns Separatists

Yemen's president warned southern separatists who demand the independence of the south that they will be defeated but also offered to engage in dialogue over their demands.

"The separatist flags are going to burn in the coming days and weeks," President Ali Abdullah Saleh told top military ranks on Monday, Middle East Online reported.

Saleh spoke after security forces cracked down on activists of the separatist movement in several southern towns that were part of the former South Yemen.

But the Yemeni leader offered to talk to the secessionists about their political demands. Southerners complain of economic and social discrimination at the hands of the northern-controlled government.

"If there are any political demands, they are welcome. Come to dialogue," he said.

"Now, we are going to form local committees to talk to these forces, if they accept dialogue," he added, stressing that "real demands" will be welcome.

South Yemen was independent from 1967 until it united with the north in 1990. The south seceded in 1994, sparking a short-lived civil war that ended when the south was overrun by northern troops.

Syria, Israel Eye Nuclear Plants

Mideast rivals Israel and Syria on Tuesday each announced ambitions to develop nuclear energy, with Israel facing the prospect that its plan could bring new attention to its secretive nuclear activities.

The countries laid out their hopes at an international conference in Paris on civilian nuclear energy—which contributes far less to global warming than burning of fossil fuels but still evokes many concerns about long-term safety issues, AP reported.

The announcements raise the prospect that the countries' nuclear programs could come under the microscope of international inspectors to ensure that they don't cross the forbidden line into weapons programs. Iran, for example, has come under intense pressure to show its nuclear program is peaceful.

Israeli Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau said nuclear plants built in Israel will be subject to strict safety and security controls, and even said his country would like to build them in cooperation with scientists and engineers from "our Arab neighbors."

"Israel has always considered nuclear power to partially replace its dependence on coal," Landau said.

The program aims to help Israel secure its energy supplies and battle global warming. Israel currently uses coal and natural gas to produce electricity.

The effort by Israel, which has long been suspected to have a secret nuclear weapons program, runs the risk that its nuclear energy program will draw the eyes of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Separately at the conference, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Mekdad his country is looking at "alternative energy sources, including nuclear energy" to meet its growing demands for energy. "The peaceful application of nuclear energy should not be monopolized by the few that own this technology but should be available to all," Mekdad said, noting Syria's growing population.

He did not elaborate on specific nuclear plans.

Somalia Welcome US Air Support

Somalia's government would welcome US air support for an expected offensive aimed at retaking control of areas from Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabab rebels, President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed said on Tuesday.

Speaking on a visit to Britain, Sheikh Sharif added that international aid for reconstruction would be needed to secure any areas gained in the push, expected in coming weeks in a test of attempts to restore stability in the Horn of Africa nation. The New York Times reported on March 5 US forces could get involved by providing airstrikes and Special Forces Operations if the offensive succeeded in dislodging Al-Qaeda fighters, Reuters reported.

Asked to comment, Ahmed said: "If the US government provides us with the air support, it will help the situation."

"If that is true, as written in the New York Times, then we would welcome it," he told a news conference through an interpreter.