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Armenian President Says Ready to Restart Reconciliation with Turkey

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Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan

Armenia's president said on Wednesday he was ready to normalize relations with Turkey, two months after he withdrew peace accords from parliament, blaming a Turkish lack of political will to end 100 years of hostility.

Speaking ahead of Friday's centenary of the mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks, which is at the heart of the problems between the countries, Armenian President Serzh Sarksyan said there should be no preconditions in restarting the peace process and would not insist the Turks accept they committed genocide.

"We shall at the end of the day establish normal relations with Turkey, and establishing those normal relations should be without any preconditions," Sarksyan told a group of foreign journalists.

Armenia, a country of 3.2 million, signed accords with Turkey in October 2009 to establish diplomatic relations and open the land border between the countries, but the agreements

stalled in the parliaments of both nations, with each side accusing the other of trying to rewrite the texts and setting new conditions.

The deal could bring huge economic gains for landlocked Armenia as well as burnish Turkey's credentials as an EU candidate and boost its clout in the strategic South Caucasus.

Muslim Turkey accepts that many Christian Armenians died in partisan fighting during World War I, but denies the Armenian assertion that up to 1.5 million were killed, and that it amounted to genocide.

Ahead of the centenary, the pope and the European Parliament angered Ankara by using the word genocide to describe the killings. On Wednesday, Turkey called a similar declaration by the Austrian parliament outrageous and said that no country should "lecture others on history."

Sarksyan said the reconciliation process could restart "when Turkish leadership is ready to establish normal relations without any preconditions.

"He had withdrawn the accords from parliament, he said, to send a "political message" to Turkey.

"The ratification of the protocols is something that we want, but it takes two to tango and it does not only depend on us," Sarksyan said.

Dozens of government delegations, including the presidents of France, Russia, Serbia and Cyprus are expected to take part in the commemorations on Friday.

U.S. President Barack Obama is not expected to use the word "genocide" in a statement to mark the anniversary, something Sarksyan said was just to avoid angering an important ally.

"We, of course, would want Mr. Obama to use the word genocide in his statement," Sarksyan said. "It's not that the United States does not recognize the genocide, it just does not want to use this particular word in order not to insult their ally Turkey."

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