

Armenia border deal at the edge

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Time is running out for Turkey to ratify the border-opening deal with Armenia that began with a football match last year and reached the stage of signing normalization protocols in October, Armenia's foreign minister has said.

"The whole world has supported these protocols and they should be approved at once," said Edward Nalbandian, repeatedly voicing frustration that the deal has become embroiled with Turkish demands for progress on the frozen conflict between Azerbaijan and the Armenian-occupied enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.



PROGRESS: Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian (R), sitting next to his press advisor, says it is time for the parliaments of Turkey and Armenia to ratify the protocols. DAILY NEWS photo

Nalbandian repeatedly used the protocol language that the ratification process be concluded in a "reasonable period of time." But his tone and comments from other officials here made it

clear that sooner is better and Armenia will withdraw from the talks if progress does not occur by March.

"In March, there will be a point of no return. January is the best timeframe.

clear they are worried about both domestic political pressure and reaction from America's Armenian diaspora, which has been skeptical of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, as the symbolic moment again nears.

However, it was Turkey's domestic politics that was on the minds of Armenian officials and journalists who came together in Yerevan for four days of discussion organized by Armenia's Eurasia Partnership Foundation and Turkey's Global Political Trends Center from Istanbul Kültür University.

Erdoğan's Azeri trip

Shortly after the October protocol signing, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan traveled to Azerbaijan in the wake of Azerbaijani outrage over the possibility of a border opening without progress on Armenia's de facto occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The enclave and other occupied territory constitute 20 percent of Azerbaijan. In 1993, Turkey closed its land border with Armenia in solidarity with Azerbaijan. Erdoğan's statement, and similar remarks since, have calmed Azerbaijani fears, but have sparked Armenian accusations that Turkey is violating the terms of the protocol that stipulate a border opening with "no preconditions." Many Armenians feel they have done their part of the "no pre-conditions" deal by not insisting on Turkish recognition of the word "genocide." Domestically, the stance is a major reason for parliamentary and diaspora opposition to the deal.

A stumbling block for opposition deputy Stepan Safarian is the protocol

After that, every morning it will be more difficult to do this than the day before," said Vigen Sarkisian, the deputy chief of the Armenian presidency.

He signaled that a catalyst for the sense of urgency is the symbolic date of April 24, when Armenians mark the claim of genocide that strongly divides the two countries. That date drove the two sides to the initial signing of the "road map" that preceded the protocols.

The first formal step came just one day ahead of that date this year.

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a tour of diaspora communities in the United States to sell his plan to skeptics. Officials here said that campaign had been successful, and some elements of the powerful diaspora have been convinced of the wisdom of improving relations with Turkey.

Deputy Artak Zakarian told journalists that an annual fundraising drive among diaspora communities this year exceeded last year's receipts, an indicator of sympathy with the government's direction. Armenia's parliament has yet to ratify the protocol and officials here said they would do so only if the Turkish Parliament does so first. As the initiative began with Sarkisian's invitation to Turkish President Abdullah Gül to attend the now-famous football match, Turkey's legislature should be the first to ratify, they argued.

As to any step, however symbolic, on Nagorno-Karabakh, Nalbandian and his colleagues insisted this is an absolute non-starter. The two issues are distinct and "parallel," they repeated, and cannot be coupled.

"There can be no preconditions – in the protocols there are absolutely no preconditions," Nalbandian said. He said the Armenian and Azeri presidents have met repeatedly, and that is where any discussion of Karabakh must remain. He said it would be inappropriate for him to comment on the domestic politics of Turkey behind Erdoğan's declarations but said if the border initiative dies, it will be the next generation of Turks and Armenians who will have to resolve their differences. "Turkey and Armenia have been divided for nearly 100 years," he said. "Let's not live this



MEETING: Armenian FM Nalbandian (C) says the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents have met repeatedly, and that is where any discussion of Karabakh must remain.

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The step was propelled by pressure from President Barack Obama, who Turkey feared would voice the word "genocide," setting the stage for the U.S. Congress to recognize the killing of Armenians in the final days of the Ottoman Empire with the same term.

In a twist of linguistic diplomacy, Obama instead referred to the events of 1915 of "Meds Yeghern," Armenian for "great calamity." No one, however, expects that nuance to work a second time. Armenians here have made it clear they are worried about both do-

mission to look at the "historical dimension" of relations. The avoidance of specific "genocide" language allows both sides to interpret the document differently, said Safarian, leader of the "Heritage Faction" in the Armenian parliament. "How can a protocol perceived differently by two sides be a good protocol?" he asked.

After the initial deal, one party in the governing coalition of Armenian President Serge Sarkisian withdrew from the government. That deal also forced the Armenian president to go on a tour of diaspora communities in the