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# Cautious optimism in Armenia ahead of historic Gul visit

By Mariam Harutunian

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Turkish President Abdullah Gul's historic visit to Armenia on Saturday is fuelling hopes here of an end to the two countries' long estrangement, but no one is expecting a quick breakthrough.

"The Turkish president's visit to Armenia is of huge importance," said Yerevan-based political analyst Sergei Shakariants.

"But it is impossible to expect that a first meeting will be enough to resolve problems that have endured for centuries. This meeting is a simple first contact," he said.

Gul will go to Yerevan to attend a World Cup qualifying football match between the two countries, which have no diplomatic relations and have waged a bitter international diplomatic battle over Armenia's attempts to have massacres of their kin under the Ottoman Empire classified as genocide.

Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian, who has taken a softer line on relations with Turkey since coming to power earlier this year, invited Gul to attend the match.

"Without forgetting the past, we must look to the future," Sarkisian told a gathering of Armenian diplomats in Yerevan Wednesday.

"If there is a dialogue, we can discuss any, even the most difficult questions. We must shape a mutually beneficial agenda and begin contacts without preconditions," he said.

Analysts said Gul's visit was directly linked with NATO member Turkey's efforts to establish a forum to boost cooperation in the volatile Caucasus, involving regional countries and Moscow.

Turkey proposed the forum after tensions between Georgia and Russia erupted in a military conflict last month.

"Turkey is looking to play a greater geopolitical role in developments in the region, in particular since the events in Georgia," said Ruben Safrastian of the Institute of Oriental Studies at Armenia's National Academy of Sciences.

"And if Turkey wants to succeed with its initiative to create a Caucasus forum, it will have to improve relations with Armenia," he said.

On the streets of Yerevan, winemaker Sambel Karibian said that individual Turks and Armenians had long been able to set their differences aside and that it was time for their governments to do the same.

"Ordinary Armenians and Turks have for years been meeting and communicating," Karibian said. "Why can't the leaders of our countries do the same? When you deal with a person face-to-face, all stereotypes collapse."

Syuzan Mkrtchian, an art critic, said what is most important is that the meeting is followed with concrete steps, such as the restoration of diplomatic ties and re-opening of the two countries' border.

"The Turkish side needs to understand that this is important not only for Armenia, but for them as well," Mkrtchian said. "Is (Gul) just trying to show

the world that he is open for dialogue? The most important thing is that this meeting is followed up."

Gul's visit to Armenia will only last a few hours, but it is also unprecedented as no other Turkish head of state has visited the neighbouring country.

Turkey has refused to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia since it became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. The key reason is Yerevan's campaign for the deaths of Armenian civilians in 1915-1917 to be classified as genocide.

Armenia says up to 1.5 million people were killed in orchestrated massacres during World War I as the Ottoman Empire fell apart.

Turkey rejects the genocide label and argues that 250,000-500,000 Armenians and at least as many Turks died in civil strife as Armenians fought for independence in eastern Anatolia and sided with invading Russian troops.

In 1993, Ankara closed its border with Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh, an Armenian-majority region in Azerbaijan which proclaimed independence.

Backed by Armenia, ethnic Armenian forces took control of the mountainous territory during a war in the early 1990s that left nearly 30,000 dead and sparked an exodus of around one million.

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