
Iranian president visits Armenia as economic and political ties grow

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YEREVAN, Armenia: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Armenia on Monday and struck several agreements to bolster economic ties between the two nations.

Ahmadinejad and his Armenian counterpart, Robert Kocharian, discussed plans to build a railway link and two hydroelectric power plants on the border river, Araks.

The projects are important for landlocked Armenia, which has struggled with power shortages and transport blockades since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey have shut their borders with Armenia in the wake of a conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, a breakaway region of Azerbaijan controlled by ethnic Armenians.

"We had very good talks that will help the development of infrastructure between our nations," Ahmadinejad said after the agreements were signed. "There are good prospects for a constructive cooperation to the benefit of the regional security."

The two presidents said that construction of the railroad, which would give Armenia long-sought access to the Persian Gulf, could begin next year after a technical survey.

Kocharian said construction of the hydroelectric plants on the Araks river could also start soon, but he would not give further details.

He added that Iran and Armenia "are seriously determined" to build an oil refinery in Armenia. Officials have discussed plans for an oil pipeline from Iran to Armenia, but no agreements have been signed yet.

After Monday's talks between Ahmadinejad and Kocharian, officials from the two nations also signed agreements on trade, banking and support for mutual investment.

Earlier this month, Iran opened its borders to Armenian trucks transporting goods to Iranian ports on the Caspian Sea, a more direct route for goods destined for Central Asia or southern Russia than the alternative route through Georgia.

Kocharian was Ahmadinejad's guest last year in Tehran, and in March the two presidents formally opened the first Armenian section of a natural gas pipeline between the two countries.

"We seriously intend to develop joint oil and gas projects," Kocharian said Monday.

The two leaders did not touch on international issues at their news conference, but Ahmadinejad later launched a thinly veiled attack on U.S. policy in a speech at the Armenian State University.

"The world must be governed by good, striving for justice and morality," Ahmadinejad said. "If the leaders of great powers proceeded >From these values, there wouldn't have been occupation of Iraq ... and bloodshed in Afghanistan and Palestine."

On Tuesday, the Iranian leader will enter the controversy over the World War I-era killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks by laying a wreath at the memorial complex commemorating the victims.

Scholars view the killing of 1.5 million Armenians, who were Christians, as the first genocide of the 20th century. But debate on a resolution in the U.S. Congress that would recognize the killings as genocide has angered Turkey, which says the toll has been inflated and that those killed were victims of civil war and unrest.

Ahmadinejad avoided taking sides on the issue in Monday's speech before the university students, saying only that Iran condemns any crimes against humanity.

He has caused outrage in the past by suggesting that the Holocaust is a "myth" invented by Jews. An estimated 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

Source: <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/10/22/europe/EU-GEN-Armenia-Iran.php>
